STREET & SMITH'S
UNKNOWN
FANTASY FICTION
20c
FEB. 1940
DEATH'S DEPUTY by L. Ron Hubbard

NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS

The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

BEFORE

AFTER

AT THE FIRST SYMPTOM OF A

COLD OR SORE THROAT—Listerine, *QUICK!*

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on the throat surfaces to kill "secondary invaders" . . . the very types of germs that make a cold more troublesome.

This prompt and frequent use of full strength Listerine Antiseptic may keep a cold from getting serious, or head it off entirely . . . at the same time relieving throat irritation when due to a cold.

Its value as a precaution against colds and sore throats has been demonstrated by some of the sanest, most impressive research work ever attempted in connection with cold prevention and treatment.

Ten Years of Research

Actual tests conducted on employees in several industrial plants during a ten year period of research revealed this astonishing truth: That those who gargled Listerine Antiseptic twice daily had fewer colds and milder colds than non-users, and fewer sore throats.

This impressive record is explained, we believe, by Listerine Antiseptic's germ-killing action . . . its ability to kill threatening "secondary invaders"—the very types of germs that live in the mouth and throat and are largely responsible, many authorities say, for the bothersome aspects of a cold.

Tests Showed Outstanding Germ Reductions on Tissue Surfaces

When you gargle with Listerine Antiseptic, that cool amber liquid reaches way back on throat surfaces and kills millions of the "secondary invaders" on those areas—not all of them, mind you, but so many that any major invasion of the delicate membrane may be halted and infection thereby checked.

Even 15 minutes after Listerine gargle, tests have shown bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7%. Up to 80% an hour afterward.

In view of this evidence, don't you think it's a sensible precaution against colds to gargle with Listerine systematically twice a day and oftener when you feel a cold getting started?

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

GENUINE DU PONT "LUCITE" ILLUMINATOR

WATCH YOUR THROAT
where illness often starts

LISTERINE THROAT LIGHT

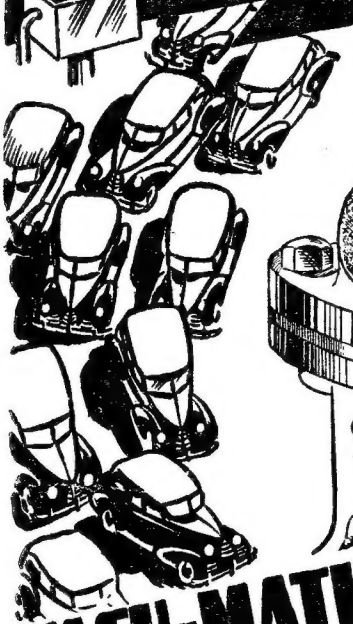
ONLY 75¢ *Batteries Included*

At the first sign of a cold, call a doctor.

Calling All Cars!

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY SAVES UP TO 30% on GASOLINE!

OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY



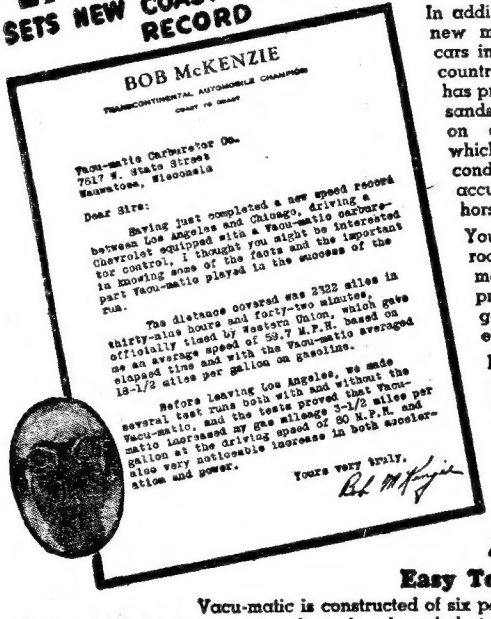
Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills —gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power — greater speed — quicker pickup — faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing *automatically* as required to save dollars on gas costs.

VACU-MATIC "Scores" Again

SETS NEW COAST-TO-CHICAGO RECORD



BOB McKENZIE

TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION

CHIEF OF STAFF

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State Street
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 58.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 50 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,

In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

You, too, can make a road test with Vacu-matic on your car and prove its worthwhile gas savings to your entire satisfaction.

Learn all about this remarkable discovery. Get the facts NOW!

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.

Signed Notary Public

AGENTS Get Yours FREE For Introducing

Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

Fits All Cars

Easy To Install

Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co. **Wauwatosa, Wis.**

AST—1

SEND THIS Free Offer COUPON

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-490 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in Agency Proposition.

STREET & SMITH'S

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COVER BY ED. CARTIER

Illustrations by: Cartier, Finlay, M. Isip and R. Isip

Monthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Treasurer. Copyright, 1940, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1940, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, February 21, 1939, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada, Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, $2.25 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, $2.75 per year.

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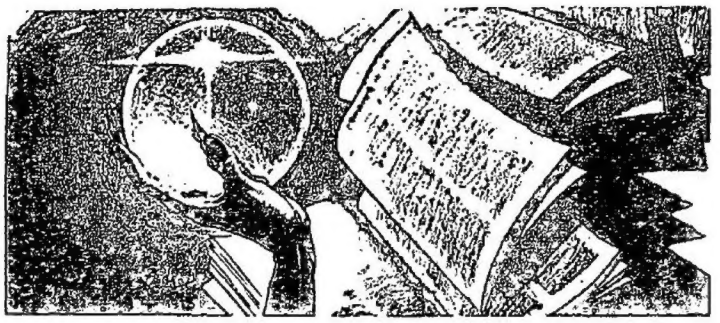

OF THINGS BEYOND

The feature story for the March Unknown—which will, incidentally, begin the second year of Unknown, as this closes the first—is to be "The Reign of Wizardry," by Jack Williamson. It has as background what is, perhaps, the most fascinating and intellectually irritating civilization yet discovered—the Minoan Culture.

The archæologists have found ruins on Crete, ruins that indicate that a culture some three thousand years ahead of the rest of the world existed there before the Greek culture had more than begun. The Minoans seem to have been several centuries ahead of Europe as of 1600 A. D. There are definite hints that the Minoan culture was closely approaching our own present civilization in some ways though, inevitably, there were differences. Evolution of ideas may roughly parallel, but there will be differences, more emphasis on this or the other phase of knowledge.

But the legend of Daedelus and Icarus told of two men, father and son, who made flying machines—successful flying machines that worked. One, at least, ascended high enough that, when faulty structural members failed, the pilot crashed to his death. The description of—perhaps a glider, it was—at any rate, of the machines, was very faulty, of course. The Greeks of the day were herdsmen, not the intellectuals of Plato's time. And it is from them—because we can read Greek, but not Minoan—that we get our reports.

Then there was the legend of the Brass Giant who stalked about the island, defending it against all invaders. In that age, when iron was very new in the world, and brass and bronze precious metals, the idea of a giant man of bronze or brass required imagination. The idea of such a man walking—

Well, that might be a fairly small flight of imagination to a man who knew a machine civilization, wherein gliders and flying machines and robots—particularly robots designed to frighten away semi-savages of the outside world—were fairly common.

But the Greeks must have had some basis for that legend.

And Jack Williamson uses it as the basis for a grand yarn.

THE EDITOR.

The Moving Finger Writes,

--AND HAVING WRIT---

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Russell's essentially Baconian in his approach in "Over the Border"—but not quite enough. While I liked his article immensely from the standpoint of its basic Forteanism, I nevertheless regretted he dealt with his data in a snatch-and-run fashion that in many ways did it more violence than good. He was a bit too cocksure, and too hasty: tried to cover too much territory in too little space.

Had I no good reason for writing this letter, I'd keep still. It so happens I've been working on the same theory as Russell's motif for his article, and have put the major part of the past three years into a study of the data dealt with by Fort—especially on the phenomena Fort guessed were spacecraft, or attributable to spacecraft—such as the Black Rains, Falls of "Meteoric" Fuel from the sky, et cetera; and in addition to this, the vanishments of ships and crews at sea. I have worked on this from the arbitrary standpoint that such phenomena as the moonlike things that reportedly rose from behind the hills of Sussex in 1855, were not emissions from the imaginations of liars, because there've been too many such reports. Instead, feeling that perhaps the gate of understanding might open a trifle if these data were studied persistently enough, I anatomized Fort's encyclopedic lore with an eye toward attempting to riddle the secret of their origin.

I can give you no idea of the amount of labor, backtracking, changing of tack and boring through stone walls that have been attendant on this work, but suffice it to say at last I came upon a fascinating means of lining up the data—and this was a time-chart based on the synodic periods of Venus and Mars. I have compared the unknown with the known, and have arrived at a departure into logical hypothesis, for now I can say that I do have some good reason to think that many of the unusually rapid comets, slow meteors, falls of coal, ash, slag and cinders, whirling lights in the sea, and other kindred chimerae of fact, are amenable to comparison on a definite scale of time. Also, from as much data as I've been able to collect on mysteries of ship disappearances, et cetera, these, too, line themselves on the same scale.

Now, I myself am liable to wild outbreaks of enthusiasm on this subject, but sooner or later the healthy force of natural doubt drags me back into line; I can easily understand Russell's inflated enthusiasm with this idea—all the more forcibly, because his ideas are essentially the same as mine, so much so I was astounded beyond all measure on reading "Over the Border."

It boots nothing to criticize science. Scientists, unfortunately, harbor among their ranks many men who are infinitely capable but lamentably short on imagination. If a man's inherent drives are power-

Continued on page 122

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED — THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH, MARY. EVERYTHING LOOKS SO HOPELESS
IT ISN'T HOPELESS, BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY RADIO. TOM GREEN IS DOING WELL. TALK TO HIM
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG GROWING FIELD
TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
THERE'S NO END TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
OR WORK ON LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS
OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO. MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS! THAT'S $10 EXTRA I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME JOB NOW--AND A BRIGHT FUTURE IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator."
HOLLIS F. HAYES
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"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M—— Furniture Co. for their four stores."
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in your spare time for a
GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 years

Radio is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. Smith, President
Dept. OAD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Mail this to get 64 page book FREE

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. OAD,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly.)

NAME .....AGE.....

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It's the story of the ultimate, grim goal of dictatorship, worked out in perfect detail.

It's the story of propaganda being reduced to an exact science—even to an index of the emotional value of words.

It's a blue-print plan with every nut and joint marked with deadly precision. And this story, that should thrill a nation, is but one of 10 features that will thrill you in—

ASTOUNDING
SCIENCE-FICTION

FEBRUARY ISSUE
NOW ON SALE
20 CENTS A COPY

Death's DEPUTY

by L. RON HUBBARD

DEATH'S DEPUTY

by L. RON HUBBARD

Pure fantasy, of course—but every sailorman knows the reality of the Jonah—and every insurance man dreads the accident-prone!

Illustrated by Cartier

SOMEWHERE in France a silver wing flashed against the dull sky. A pilot wiped a weary hand across his oil-fogged goggles, raking the heavens with bloodshot eyes.

He was tired. His nerves, for days as taut as bowstrings, were sagging now as he finished the third consecutive day of patrol. What went on below him he did not know. What orders had been issued on this or the other side of the lines, no one had bothered to say. History might be in the making down there or a stalemate might have locked a million men in stagnation.

It was not for Captain Clayton McLean to judge.

His world reached only as far as the gray horizon, his kingdom only out to the wingtips and tail of his Vickers Spitfire. He was to patrol this air and allow no photographer to come through.

For three days he had succeeded. In three days his wings had become pock-marked, his engine ragged and his guns out of line. And he still patrolled.

First there had been three on patrol. Now there was one.

And to the north six dots, growing larger, told him that once again he would test his skill and his plane.

A few minutes before, he had seen two squadrons of Hawker Hurricanes heading east. He looked anxiously for them now, well knowing how badly he needed their help. But his own concentric circles and the black crosses which bore down upon him were the only insignia in the sky.

He clutched his phone close to his lips, wheeling away to intercept the enemy. "Captain McLean calling Field 43. Calling Field 43. Calling Field 43 . . . Hello 43. Six Henschel 126s coming over in Sector 5, heading about 190. Is there any help for me nearby?"

"Three squadrons five minutes west, McLean. Can you hold them up like a good fellow?"

"I can try."

"Luck."

"Good-by, Forsythe."

Clay verticaled. He cleared the throats of his guns, reassured by the eight snaps of flame which jetted from his wings. He leveled off, righting the earth below, putting the leading Henschel in his ringsights. He was a hundred and forty-odd miles an hour faster than they and he closed the gap so abruptly that he had no more than gotten a true sight than the Henschels were gone. He looped and was rushing at them once more. Thin black lines were drawn around him by tracer. He caught a glimpse of a brown helmet close by and a hand raised in salute.

When he came around again a Henschel was falling.

Pulling up above them he stared to east and west to find help. But he found none. Once more he went down into it, through a maelstrom of curving wings and spitting guns. He was through it so swiftly that, in the first fraction of a second, he could not believe that he had been touched. But when he tried to use rudder he found that his leg refused to function. And when he reached for his throttles he discovered that a command to his arm did not mean obedience.

Something stung his lungs. Gasoline! But before he cut his switch he was burning.

LOOKING straight ahead he saw the earth, twisting up to smash him. And then the earth was blotted out by the smoke-vomiting engine. A blast of heat swept away his brows.

He forgot his arm only to remember when he found that his belt was not unbuckled yet. He forgot it again in struggling past the hood. Not to have a right arm that worked was a soul-wrenching experience.

The wind was like a stone wall, breaking his back over the cockpit streamlining. He couldn't get his leg to bear upon the seat, he couldn't unlock this trap.

"Damn you!" he screamed at his plane.

Somehow he got his foot free and gave the stick a thrust, the action throwing him over to the right and clear. He tumbled, now looking at a sky full of Henschels and Hurricanes, now at a scarred earth which tilted and wobbled like a run-down top.

Reaching for his ripcord, he yanked. But no pilot chute slithered out of his pack. And staring at his breast he found that the ring had not been touched. His right arm!

And still he tumbled, reaching his own terminal velocity and straightening out and still falling free at an earth whose rim curved up and away from him. The spot which stood still was the place where he would hit and dig his own grave with his impact.

He struggled to get his left hand around the ring but his flying suit was bulky and he had no way to get a purchase.

Suddenly he was calm. For the years he had fought other men's wars he had waited for this moment. He was even thankful that it had come. An end of struggling and the expectation of pain. An end of life as he knew it.

Then, suddenly, he rebelled. To hell with death. What right had fate to snatch his life from him in so rotten a style? So far he had made his own luck and somehow before he struck he would continue to make it!

He could not be sure, but he thought he heard a voice. The wind through his buckles—but—

"Live yet a while, child of sorrow. We have a use for you later on."

And something was there before him, what it was he could not be sure. The ripcord was yanked out. The pilot chute streaked up and away. The jerk on his harness made his pain-racked body spin about. He was drifting. The earth thudded into him.

Mercifully, he knew no more.

II.

WEEKS LATER, with only his Canadian uniform and the ache in his leg remaining of his service, Clay McLean sat in Central Park. His hands were crossed upon his cane and his eyes were closed in grateful-

ness for the winter sunlight which soaked into him. Pigeons paraded, cooing, upon the walk and somewhere near children could be heard romping, all oblivious of the signs which read, "Keep Off the Grass."

He was trying hard not to think and the sun was helping some. But even so, now and then, the weight of fact crept in upon him.

He would never fly again.

Over and over it kept ringing in his mind.

Never.

Time after time he tried to keep his thoughts from straying to it by reaching far back into his life in the hope that he could pick out some memory not associated with flight. But, if he dreamed of boyhood, he remembered model planes and a father who had helped build them. And, if he thought of his father, he remembered the airline crash which had taken him.

All else but flight was a blur to him. For every struggle in his rebellious life centered upon one thing. How he had fought his way through two years of college, unaided, paying his way by barnstorming an already well-covered district. How he had passed his math only because he had loved flying in common with his professor.

Illness had decreed that he could no longer continue at Randolph Field. But somewhere in the amazing vitality of him he had found strength enough to recover completely and carry on. At every step of his whole way he had been dogged by impossibilities. And every time he had risen in revolt to batter them down.

Toward fate he had always had a combative attitude. It almost amounted to a personal struggle with the gods. And out of each battle he had come victorious, convinced of the one creed by which he lived.

He knew no master but himself. But knew no fate that was not of his own making.

Birth and death; these things he could accept. But anything between was his! He was for his own molding, not for any other's. And when he had joined hands with a god it had been because he had willed it, not because it was necessary.

This he had believed. He had set himself higher than fate and each time he had won. Streaking down to destruction with a student's hands frozen on the controls he had done the impossible by leveling out the plane. Fighting a failing engine over the Rockies he had made his ship glide half again as far as the maker had said it could and had come down alive. Through fog he had forced himself to find his way.

There had never been a problem too great, or an obstacle too high.

Until now.

He would never fly again.

But he did not sag under it. Rather, once again, he was bolstered by a heavy rage at being bested. What did he care what the doctors said? They had told him his arm would have to come off. He had kept his arm. And now they said that his leg would be useless forever—

"Damn them, it's not true!"

He started up, throwing his full weight against the offending member—and it collapsed under him.

Gray with the pain of it he crouched there upon the walk, waiting for the sickness to die before he rose.

HE FELT a hand under his arm, seeking to help him rise. All the rage which he had felt scorched in

him now. Who dared to help him, to pity him?

"I am quite able to help myself," he said very coldly as he turned. But the hand persisted until he was again on the bench. The pain of it had blacked out his helper.

"Leave me alone," he snarled.

"Hadn't I better call someone?"

And he said, "Get away," before he saw that the Samaritan was a woman. And then, seeing that he had hurt her and feeling ashamed that he had, he hardened his tone. "I'm quite able to get myself about. What do you take me for, a cripple?"

Her blue eyes misted. He did not see her plainly until then. Her hair was gold and her skin was alabaster. He forgot that he hurt, and experienced a sudden longing to have her sit down by him. And almost the same instant he knew that that same longing was a sort of surrender, a wish to rest his head upon her shoulder and rest.

"I am sorry," she said.

Her voice he found pleasant.

"It must be—"

"I've enough pity to last me awhile," he said, rebelling once more.

She took a slight step backward as though repelled by his savageness. "But you look so white—"

"I haven't had time to get a sunburn, yet. Now hand me a dime and make the picture complete."

"Why . . . I . . . had no intention—"

"It's happened before."

"But you . . . you are a captain in the Canadian Air Force. Why should anyone—"

"I was," said Clay. "But not now. These are all the clothes I have, so you will forgive my wearing them."

For a time she stood there studying him, taking in the resentment of his eyes. He was young, not more than thirty. He was handsome despite his pallor. He had the look of an eagle in chains.

At last she turned and started away. He watched her back and thought how straight it was and how gracefully flowed her swagger coat. She was like—like some lovely statue come to life—like an angel or a sunset or a new racing plane—

He wanted to call after her and ask her to come back. But he didn't.

Into his mind came the words: "Clay, you've got to take this as well as you can. Somebody will have to tell you and it might as well be me. Your leg, Clay— *You'll never fly again.*"

III.

THEY had told him to be careful, not to overdo for yet a while. But if he was not tired he could not sleep and today his restlessness had carried him much farther away from the cheap roominghouse than he had any right to go.

And though his whole side felt feverish and his head buzzed and whirred as though full of bombers, still he could not sleep. Staring into the blueness of his room he saw again her face.

How cool her flesh would feel beneath his hand. How aloof she was. And those eyes; how willingly a man could drown his soul in them!

Who she was he did not know. He only knew that he ached for the restfulness of laying his head upon her shoulder and there finding calmness and strength.

They had given him tonics and he had thrown them away. He had sought healing in the sun and air and had found only memory and pain.

More than anything else in the

world, he knew, he needed this woman. Needed her to share the weight upon him, needed the coolness of her hand against his face, the sweetness of her lips—

And restlessly he turned, feeling only disgust for himself, for the half-death he had found somewhere in the skies of France. It was very late before he slept.

And tonight his ordinary dreams and nightmares would be as nothing for—

At the stroke of two a finger prodded him like a bayonet.

He turned, muttering against the intrusion, half convinced it was the night nurse.

"Come, come, my friend, we haven't all night, you know."

Resentfully he stirred, trying to close out the voice. And then, suddenly, he knew that he had heard it before. He came up on his elbow, wide-awake, staring at a fluorescent light which hung cloudily at his side. Below it a dark blot drooped down. There were no features. It was a presence only.

"Aren't you awake yet?" said the voice with impatience. "We have a very long way to go."

"Haven't . . . you spoken to me before?"

"Have I? I forget such details. Perhaps I could look it up. But there's little time for chitchat now. Come along."

"Who requires it?"

"What a fellow. You're to come with me, that's all. Isn't it enough?"

"Why should I go with you?" said Clay stubbornly.

"Because it is ordered. Because I require it. Because you would be a fool if you did not. Come, now, I dislike force."

He felt very cold. "Where do you intend to take me?"

"Are you a god that you must have answers to everything?"

Clay felt the force which was compelling him up. He was curiously without weight, like going over the hump in a ship. He felt the warmth of the bed sink out from under him, felt the draft of air from the window and then a cold hand gripped his own.

"No!" shouted Clay.

But the room was dissolving about him and, in a moment, he was out of it.

"Don't look down," said the messenger.

He had expected to see New York spread out below him, but not so. Instead of a panorama of rivers and tall buildings studded with twinkling light, there was a void. Nothing at all.

"I told you not to," complained the messenger.

Clay tried to pull the coat up about his throat, for it was increasingly cold. He found no collar there to pull.

"Don't be a fool," said the messenger. "Does a man have to drag a body everywhere?"

Clay relaxed then. He let himself be pulled wherever the messenger would. After a long time, he said, "Aren't we almost there?"

"Ah, so you understand where you are going."

"I can't say that I do."

"After your last crash, one would think you'd have enough wit to encompass it. Ah, but men are so awfully stupid."

AHEAD OF THEM a cloudy white series of walls was rearing, perfectly blank, cutting an angular pattern against the darker sky, perched, evidently, upon nothingness. As they drew nearer Clay saw the one break, a square of black which

slowly resolved itself into the details of a door.

The messenger slowed their pace and seemed to be primping himself a bit. When they were very near, the square was flung open, turning from black to scarlet like the mouth of a beast.

The halls wound without pattern, carrying them deeper into the place, growing ever larger until, suddenly, they were brought into a mammoth cavern. And here the messenger thrust Clay forcefully forward, for Clay would not otherwise have gone on, so ominous was the scene before him.

Pillars of flames upheld the smoky ceiling, their support very fitful for they dwindled and leaped and twisted and writhed and gave to the place a constant pattern of light and shadow, never certain, never long enduring.

The floor was like quicksand, yellow and undulating, where footprints remained only for seconds and where feet were constantly in danger of being mired.

At the far end, but half seen through the acrid haze, a pedestal stood between two fiery columns, quite evidently a throne.

"Don't be afraid," said the messenger. "You're not brought here as food, you know."

Clay walked slowly toward the throne, curiously impervious to all this apparent heat around him. But his eyes stung and he could not see all there was to see. He was almost to the throne before he realized that upon it was perched a towering figure which watched him amusedly as it twirled a scepter of polished bone.

"Bow," said the messenger urgently.

Clay looked steadily at the figure.

"Bow!" insisted the messenger.

Clay thrust it away from him. "Where is this place and why am I here?" he demanded.

The figure on the throne laughed quietly to himself. "My dear fellow, you don't seem to be aware of the fact that you are in my realms and should pay some slight homage to me."

"Who are you?" said Clay.

"Oh, that doesn't matter much, does it? You've heard of me, one way or another, probably through those who go rushing about crying out dreadful things in my name. Let's call me Destruction, that being within the limits of your understanding. And you, I presume"—and here he consulted a scroll—"are Clayton McLean. Yes, that's it. Clayton McLean, late captain, or flight captain, or some such thing in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Yes . . . yes, here it is. 'Saved life over lines—' Well, now! I recall that distinctly. Yes, distinctly. We saved your life for you. Odd function for us to perform, but done just the same. Doubtless you recall the matter. Chute wouldn't open, and aid pulled the ripcord for you. Not a good precedent but it had to be done."

"You saved my life?" said Clay. "But you just said that you were Destruction."

"Ah, yes, I can conceive of your being puzzled on that score. But one has to look after his interests, you understand. Well? Aren't you going to express your appreciation?"

"I'm not certain that I'm grateful," said Clay.

"Oh, now, don't be so childish. Of course you're grateful. Life with one leg is better than no life at all, to the human way of thinking. Be like me, content with what you have and with your powers. But then, I suppose, you're never to be con-

A giant finger—or was it smoke?—twitched at the tangled lines. A giant arm—a swirl of smoke from the flaming plane?—eased him till the freed parachute snapped open.

tented." He consulted the scroll again.

CLAY eyed him with dislike. The figure was dressed in a flowing scarlet robe, none too clean. Its face was a murky, uncertain thing, made more so by the pillars of fire which cast their mad light over the throne. Through the hall there rose and fell a constant, coarse sound which made Clay shiver.

"No, that's so. Never content," said Destruction, having checked up. "Waging a battle with fate or some such thing, it says here. Frightful conceit."

"I've always made my own luck and I'll continue to make it," said Clay, piqued.

"Now, now, there's no reason to be so savage. I realize that getting a man out of his bed in the middle of the night isn't conducive to a good temper but, after all, I'm about to alter your career, or rather, aid it." He smiled sardonically at Clay. "That is, of course, if you wish to enter my service."

"I don't understand."

"Why, it's rather simple. You enter my service, I call off the dogs. You do your duty to me and in turn I give you a hand. Compromise, or interchange, or some such thing. You aren't fond, I believe, of having to limp and mope?"

"No, I'm not fond of it. But this is very strange. Why should you want me to serve you?"

"Oh, that! Why, there are thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of them, serving me. In my direct pay, you might say, though few of them know anything at all about me. Now you, who are in a position to be of great help, rate the consideration of an interview. I've been told you were a rather forceful fellow."

"Whatever this service is," said Clay, not to be drawn in by flattery, "I want nothing to do with it. If I cannot get along without help then I cannot get along at all and would prefer not to. If you please, I should like to have your messenger guide me back."

The figure laughed quietly, passing the polished bone from hand to hand. When he looked at Clay again, leaping forward to get down to Clay's height, he snapped the bone in half.

"My dear fellow," said the figure, "do you suppose for an instant that you have any choice but to serve me? If I will that you serve me, then you shall do so." He sat up again. "Be reasonable. If you agree to this, things will be so simple for you."

"But I don't agree," said Clay.

Again the figure chuckled at Clay's defiance. "Well! There's a man for you. I can't say but what I admire your pluck. However, you realize thoroughly that you can't be let alone after having been allowed to talk with me."

"Go ahead and kill me," said Clay. "I'm in your hands completely. But as for serving—"

"How dramatic," said the figure. "Better death than dishonor, so to speak."

"Mock and be damned to you!"

"Old fellow," said the figure, giving the scarlet robe a hitch and then beginning to juggle the broken pieces of bone, "you've rather gotten yourself into it. I thought you were low enough in spirits to accept help from anywhere. You definitely won't listen to my proposition?"

"No."

The figure shrugged and appeared to be getting bored by the discussion. "Very well. So be it. Your num-

ber was up here three times, you know, and I withdrew it. You'll serve me or die."

The messenger was tugging at Clay's sleeve and Clay moved away.

"Remember," said the figure, suddenly evincing further interest in Clay, *"you serve me or die."* He smiled slowly and began to break the bone into further bits with careless movements of his hands.

The messenger took Clay out to the portals and pointed off into space. "There's your room. I've a number of more important things to do." He pushed Clay over the edge and though Clay strove to grab hold of the door, he was falling, falling—

Clay awoke, damp with perspiration, a little shocked by the violence of his nightmare. Fragments came back to him and the sensation of falling and falling. He knew he had run away from something and it annoyed him that he could not immediately know all about it. Like a man working a jigsaw he began to put it back together.

Men going into action always dreamed of falling and he carried the habit even into—

He would never fly again.

As it was each morning, so it was today. The blow came as though it were happening for the first time. He lay back, shutting his eyes tightly. But after a little his strength surged up in him and he flung off the covers with anger.

Was he an old woman that he would moon about this forever? He had to face it and the sooner he did the better he could repair his existence. His battle was not done, oh no! For all these years he had kept fate from whipping him down. Against everything he had kept on coming like a fighter that never knows when he's beaten.

He felt about for his slippers and then reached for his cane.

One consolation: his leg hurt less this morning.

IV.

The "professor" stood upon the corner opposite the park and beamed about him at the morning. He found it very good to be alive, for all the shabbiness of his jacket. He taught piano playing in a hall room and reveled in German philosophy on the side, refighting the battles of the nineteenth century without being at all aware of the fact that he wrested with dead men's bones. A certain Jacob had stopped by to pay his account that morning and the payment meant that the professor could get himself a new pair of glasses which his fading eyes needed badly. He had never expected that certain Jacob's mamma to pay anything at all for it is ever thus with the brilliant pupils—the bad ones are always so well heeled that it is quite impossible to discharge them on the excuse of incompetence.

It was one of those mild days of early winter which treacherously effect a mimicry of spring and lead men to believe that winter itself has already passed, not to return for another year. Even the trees, beguiled, frivolously put forth buds.

The light changed and the professor was about to cross when, looking up the street, he happened to spy a familiar uniform. Captain McLean was early today. The professor changed his mind and waited, watching the captain come nearer, leaning heavily upon a stick and apparently very tired. The professor always conceived that he had a cheering mission to perform whenever possible—and besides he loved to bait the captain with the words of men long dead.

The light shifted back again.

Clay's face was more pale than usual. He nodded his greeting to the professor.

"Well, well, captain! What brings you out so early?"

Clay rested against the paper stand. "Might as well be out as in, I suppose. Why all the smiles?"

"Today," said the professor, "is a gala day. Today I shall get me a new pair of glasses and perhaps a really good drink of beer. Bock, you know."

"Bock?"

"Ah, you didn't realize it was that close to summer, did you?"

"Can't say that I did. But you mean winter."

"Spring always brings around the summer, captain. It has never failed to happen. I have a feeling that this is a lucky year."

Clay smiled a little, not meaning to look so cynical. He looked up at the light.

Meantime the corner news vender stepped up on the curb and the professor, as was his never failing custom, touched the fellow's hump. The hunchback grinned and tipped his cap.

"If you've all the luck you want," said Clay, "why bother to do that?"

"My dear fellow, one can never have all the luck one needs."

"And you think you can buy it that way?"

"Buy it! What a coarse statement. Woo is the better word. One woos his destiny. He coaxes and cajoles—"

"And succeeds in changing it not at all," said Clay. "The only way to have luck is to make it."

"Kant says—"

"Bother Kant this morning. The moment one takes his eyes from life, things happen to him. It's a battle that starts with the cradle and ends with the grave. And man never wins."

"Darwin," sniffed the professor.

"Darwin has nothing to do with it. Men knew about the battle with life before Darwin ever came upon the scene. And men have not found out even yet all there is to know about that struggle. Man cannot see farther than his own experience. You, talking about Kant and bowing down to a gypsy superstition—"

"I believe what I believe," stated the professor. "I dislike the thought that life is struggle without beauty. This morning with its crisp air, those few shivering flowers there on the stand, the buds upon the trees across the way—this is not struggle, captain. It is beauty."

"I never deny beauty. But it's more of a trap than a help."

"How bitter the fellow has become this morning! You, with half your life ahead of you, with the face of a Greek hero, looked at by every woman that passes! You who have had excitement and hot danger—"

"And who now has a crippled leg. Professor, pay attention to your life, not the beauty around you. For one moment's lack of vigil—but why cast shadows upon your morning?"

The professor laughed happily. "Captain, there is nothing I enjoy more than an argument. You have increased my joy. You conceive of your life as a constant combat, I conceive of mine as a lovely song, soon ended but sweet the while. Let us cross and walk awhile in the park."

THE LIGHTS changed and the traffic slowed and stopped. Clay and the professor stepped off the curb between the pedestrian lines and approached the other side.

"If I think it best to woo my destiny—" began the professor.

"Look out!" cried Clay.

A town car had materialized from nothing. Looming larger, faster than a watch ticks, it roared straight upon them, bursting through the red light.

Clay strove to haul the professor back from danger. But his leg gave way and he staggered aside just enough to keep from being hit himself. The shiny black side swooped by. There was a crunching blast of rent metal and flesh. The car swerved and came to a stop just short of the walk. The professor's shoes pattered down, one, two—more than fifty feet away.

Clay hobbled to the side of the body. The professor's neck was twisted all the way around and blood was pouring from his mouth. The movements were slight and of a kind a soldier knew only too well.

Clay stood up. An officer was there, shooing away a crowd. The town car's chauffeur was out and wringing his hands and moaning something about his wife being in the hospital with a newborn son and how his job was ended.

After a little the ambulance came and the dead body was loaded aboard with scant ceremony.

"You seen it happen," said the cop to Clay.

Clay told him in sentences that sounded like a flight report, so brief and stiff were they.

The crowd departed with the ambulance. Clay stood for a long time on the walk, looking at the dark stain on the pavement, a stain which had ceased to spread but sparkled now, sewn as it was with broken glass from the headlamp.

Slowly Clay turned and hobbled into the park.

Fleetingly his dream and this accident locked together and for a moment he remembered that dream-refusal to serve. At another time he would have laughed, but under these circumstances he merely dismissed the thing as fancy.

Still—when one angers the gods death is not far behind.

Had the professor received a thing which had been intended only for Clay?

And, if death had struck once and missed him, would it strike again—with accuracy?

Only fleeting fancy, gone without any trace. Later he would know that angry gods—

V.

Laura Grant, that morning, went singing through her house. She was too busy with the duties of the day to analyze why she sang and why, strangely coupled with it, she was a little unhappy, too. But perhaps she had been unhappy for so very long that a slight mar would completely escape her notice. She sang, knowing better than to reason why.

The sound of her clear voice was strange in that house. It was an old place, deeply grimed outside with the passage of decades. Without, it resembled some stiff old lady whose lace had been soiled and was haughty because of it. Within it was moody with the creep of decay. Its arrangement had not been touched since the nineties, at first because of the excellent quality of the stuff and then because old Mrs. Grant could not bear to have it any other way. She had come out in this house, she had been married in it, Laura had been born in it and Mr. Grant had died in it—and somehow the front room still smelled sickeningly of lilies of the valley although there had been none there for years.

It was, therefore, a tomb of memories, slowly vanishing beneath

He sat on the bench with his useless leg before him, and his own fears and futility howled in his ears—

the thorough erasure of time. A strange place indeed for a girl of twenty-two.

Laura could never recall a time when anyone had laughed in that house. Her father, basing all his

prestige upon his enormous dignity, could not brook laughter, possibly because laughter is sometimes ridicule. Through her childhood her father, who had married late in his life, had stalked somberly from room to room, his sharp, cold eyes criticizing always—even though he never made mention of any wrong. As a child she had been in a constant terror lest she upset something or tear something or make a noise her father might not like. But he had never paid her for all that anxiety with as much as a kindly smile.

Her mother had been proud of Mr. Grant. He was such a pillar of stability with all his gloom that her conversation was forever ominous with things he had said. When he had died she had taken to her room and from there ruled the place without ever, from that day forward, coming out. Mr. Grant was dead. But Mrs. Grant kept his ponderous thoughts alive.

A little Irish maid, soberly dusting the tortuous curves of the mantelpiece, covertly watched Laura who, this morning, danced rather than walked. The little Irish maid had her eyes half shut with that strained attention which must be present in a bombproof during a possible air raid.

And Laura, completely oblivious of everything, today, fixed flowers and made up lists only to find that she had forgotten to put water in the vases and had ordered loaves of flour and gallons of salt.

At last the little Irish maid's suspense was over. A high-pitched voice, which rose unbelievably, crashed down from the top of the house.

"Laur-*a!*"

Laura paused and her song was still.

"*Laura!*"

She gave a guilty look at herself in the mirror in the hall and stepped to the bottom of the stairs.

"Laura, where are you?"

"Here, mother."

"Do I have to scream at you through the whole house? What would your father think if he were here? Come to me!"

Slowly and unwillingly, Laura climbed the stairs. Her conscience was bothering her now for having sung and danced, for it had evidently put her mother into a temper—and the doctor was always cautioning her about her heart.

She sidled into the room and, with lowered glance, bowed toward the bed.

The old woman, propped up with pillows, angrily thrust a book from her so that it thudded against the rug. She shoved away the box of bonbons and, as though the smear of chocolate might impede the clarity of her voice, wiped her mouth.

"What's gotten into you?" said the old woman severely.

"It—feels like spring," hesitated Laura.

"That's precious little to crow about. Humph. Winter hasn't begun! And isn't summer ghastly enough for you without trying to hurry it up? You know how I hate heat. Your father always said how bad the heat was for people."

"I'm sorry," said Laura, feeling like a hypocrite.

"Sorry. What good will that do? Singing and banging about like a possessed person! You know what the doctor said about my having to be kept quiet."

"Can I do anything—"

"You can at least give me a little peace. I shall be here little enough time now, God knows. And then this place will be yours and the

money your father left will be yours. But that's no need to hasten my going."

Laura flinched and the old woman seemed to derive some joy from it.

"Your father always said that young girls never amounted to anything these days. What do you know about money? What wild things you've done with what came to you a year ago—"

"I still have it all," said Laura, swiftly.

"How do I know that? In my time, when girls were your age, they had a husband and children and no wild ideas about careers."

"I never intend to paint for money—" began Laura, placatingly.

"What do you know about painting, or money either for that matter? Your father had very little respect for artists, let me tell you. Drinking and carousing. You're not to go to that school any more, do you hear?"

"You forbade me two years ago," Laura reminded her gently.

"So! You think I am getting too old to remember, do you? Just waiting for me to die, friendless and alone and forgotten even by my own daughter—"

"Please, mother."

"It's the truth," wept the old woman. "You agitate me just because of what the doctor said about my heart." Her voice, as she went on, was growing wild.

Hastily Laura opened a dresser drawer and brought out a fresh box of candy. The appearance of it made the old woman's voice trail off into indignant mutters. And then, suddenly, "I suppose they're all creams! You know I hate creams."

Greedily she fastened a wasted hand upon the box and began to stir the contents around, biting into pieces and discarding them. Shortly she had forgotten about everything else.

Laura was getting up her courage. "Mother—"

"Well?"

"Mother, I would like to have somebody in for dinner tonight."

"What?"

"Somebody I met—"

"Some painter, eh? Some good-for-nothing young fool after your money! No! This is still my home. Haven't you even the decency to wait until I am dead and buried beside your father? Oh," she shrilled, raising rage-stiff hands toward the oatmeal paper on the ceiling, "was there ever a woman with so many trials to bear?" And she turned toward the door to vent further wrath upon Laura.

But Laura was gone.

VI.

At dusk, Clay aimlessly stirred the gravel with his cane, not seeing the patterns he made. As a soldier he was inured to death and wise in the fact that the sooner a man casts death from his possibilities the more healthy is that man. Sympathy was the luxury of a civilian where agony was concerned.

And so, with an effort, he had put the professor out of his mind. But the blankness resulting was not filled with those fatal words to the effect that he would never fly again. No envy did he cast upon the soaring pigeons this day.

He thought not at all. His life had stopped and his whole being stood still.

Would she come by today?

At first he had watched every face anxiously, but that was eight hours ago. He had been on the alert for every footstep. But she had not come. Luncheon was forgotten even

though he had left his breakfast untouched.

The shadows of the day had grown longer and longer. A little whisper of cold wind from the lake played with a newspaper. The pigeons had grown few and, finally, were gone, all of them, to their cotes.

And still she did not come.

Suddenly he came out of himself with a shiver. His leg hurt and the wind bit through his blouse and got at his soul.

She wouldn't come.

He would never see her again. To glimpse the one thing in this world which could bring him rest and then to find that it was never to be glimpsed again—

He made an angry swirl with his cane. What a fool he was! He had let down the bars. For a few hours he had let life run itself. And it had not worked. He had wanted rest but he knew now he would never find it. Rest was death.

With his cane helping, he got up from the bench. The lights had come on now and the park was deserted. People were in their homes, letting the day die peacefully. The wind twisted at his cap and whined in his ears. Slowly he began to walk up the path.

A hand timidly touched his shoulder. It might as well have been a bullet, the way it whirled him around. He staggered and caught himself with the cane.

The street lamp reached but dimly here, not helped by the tendrils of mist which drifted along the path. Her face seemed but an illusion, fragile and lovely.

Her lips were parted a trifle and she was breathing quickly, frightened at her own temerity. She could not see his face against the soft light, only the fine outline of his head.

Clay's heart rose up to hammer in his throat. Awkwardly he took off his cap, finding nothing to say, indeed daring to say nothing lest he again send her away.

She seemed to know that he had been waiting for her, but she did not dare take it for granted.

"Yesterday," he faltered at last, "I . . . I was a little unkind. I've waited . . . hoping . . . hoping you'd come back and I could ask you to forgive me."

"Just to ask . . . . my forgiveness?"

"That and— Do you forgive me?"

"I came back," she said simply.

One by one the barriers were falling away between them and he was grateful to her for the little while that she did not speak.

An officer drifted by, a shadow in the mist. His good-natured and knowing grin brought them even closer together.

"I came to ask you to dinner," she said swiftly. "Please, please, please don't say anything. You must come and you can't say you won't, for then"—she laughed a little—"I'd be terribly embarrassed."

"As a gentleman, I could not well refuse on those grounds."

She took his arm and they went down the path in silence, aware of a bond between them which needed no strengthening talk. Clay utterly forgot himself. Once he had burst out of the dark clouds into a sunrise. He felt as light-headed and unreasoningly gay now.

After a little he began to talk, easily and naturally, as though this was a conversation they had left off but a few hours before and were unaware of any break.

Too soon for them both they came to the grim old house.

"I couldn't come sooner today,"

said Laura. "Because—my mother isn't well."

"Perhaps we had better not—"

"Oh, yes. But we must be very quiet. The mice don't even dare tiptoe here."

LIKE TWO BURGLARS they came into the hall and she hung his cap upon the massive rack. Clay was glad of a chance to watch her unobserved and was slightly annoyed with the cap for not falling down more than twice.

With exaggerated seriousness, she held her finger to her lips and guided him silently into the parlor.

"Be careful of that sofa," she whispered. "It's just waiting to stab someone."

He sat upon it gingerly.

From the marble-topped table she brought an album.

"I've been waiting to show this to someone for years and years. It's that incredible." She opened it up to "George, aged two," and with further admonitions about being quiet, floated away to give the serving of the dinner her last attention.

For some little time he could hear her stirring about and giving excited and contradictory orders to the maid. And then, at length, she came to the parlor door, warm with her busyness and half frightened that things wouldn't go right, after all.

He stood for a moment looking at the table with admiration. The cloth was creamy white, sparkling with crystal and silver. Two candles in their sticks showered a kindly glow over everything.

She let him seat her and for that he was grateful. The soup finished, a small roast was placed before him to carve. And again he was grateful. But though the food was delicious, he hardly tasted it, so wondering was he at both the girl's exquisite beauty and his own strange giddiness of mind.

At last they sat quietly, warming their brandy with their hands, just looking at each other, afraid to break into this comfortable silence. The dinner had gone well and she could relax now and forget about those hundred scattered details. She thought she had never known a more satisfying moment.

His pilot wings gleamed dully. His collar had been loosened a trifle and a lock of his hair curled down over his forehead. Happiness suffused his being and gave him grace and his uniform gave him mystery.

"You must have been very lonely here," he said, sensing it.

"Tonight I am not thinking about loneliness." But she told him how it had been, about her father whom her mother would not let die, about her mother and the grande dame she had once been to society. She told him about a brother who had been lost as a baby and how her mother had raised him in memory.

Sipping his brandy he thought about this home of illusion and how it contrasted with his own violent definiteness of life. And soon she knew of attempts to fly in kites and the hand-to-gas-tank existence of barnstorming, of the cool, clean skies and the chivalry of aërial knights.

Watching the smoke come straightly up from his cigarette she followed his words with her imagination, filling in the gaps as she could, thrilled by the things he said but more by the tones in his voice.

The candles were burning low in their sockets and their hands had wandered across the table to touch and the golden moments were drawing to an end.

Abruptly the door crashed open. Glowering at them stood the old woman, her face evil with suspicion

and contempt. Clay came to his feet and limped a few steps beside the table.

There was nothing said for seconds and the silence grew thick. And then, faltering, Laura looked from Clay to her mother.

"May . . . I introduce Captain —"

"Clayton McLean," said Clay.

The old woman glared at the cigarette smoke which spiraled up from his saucer, for it was this which had called her downstairs for the first time in years.

"Your father," said Mrs. Grant heavily, "had his opinion of men who smoked."

"I am sorry," said Clay. "Your daughter—"

"Can answer for this herself. A stranger, a man whose name she doesn't even know! A soldier!" with heavy contempt.

Clay edged toward the door, hoping to save the girl that much.

The old woman's voice rose in cruel glee. "A stranger, a soldier, and a *cripple!*"

His face was very hard and pale. Mechanically he bowed toward Laura and then, stiff as his cane, made his way to the front door, took down his cap. Laura was beside him, looking pleadingly up at him.

"A cripple!" cried the old woman behind them.

Clay opened the door and stepped out into the chilly night. When he had closed it behind him he could hear Laura sobbing. Leaning very heavily upon his cane he slowly made his way along the deserted walk.

VII.

Before he had gone two blocks the wind had cut through him. Little by little he found it more difficult to walk, for his leg was most affected by the cold. He felt more tired than ever before in his life and with each new step he slowed. Ahead of him stretched an infinity of dark houses and he visualized his room as lying half around the world. Only stubbornness kept him going and finally even that evaporated. It occurred to him that, although he had not seen a taxi, sooner or later one might cruise past. In that case there was little use in going on. His small store of cash did not make allowances for such things except in extreme necessity.

Wearily he sagged down upon the steps of a house, protected by a stone column from the knife of the wind. For some little while he stayed motionless, glad of the inaction. And then, gradually, with the return of strength, he began to revile himself for being in such a rotten condition. Next he would be using a wheel chair. His anger flickered and began to glow while he fanned it with memory after memory. Life had found him wanting and little by little, life was discarding him. Why not take him altogether and have done with this slow torture? Why maul him catlike and enjoy his misery?

To place upon his road a wonderful person like Laura and then snatch her away—that was the pattern which life had gleefully condemned him to follow. If he could only do something about this leg—

A town car came to a silent stop at the curb and out of it stepped a top-hatted gentleman who turned back to carefully aid an ermined young lady to the walk.

"I shan't need you until ten tomorrow," said the man. The car drew away and the man escorted the woman up the steps. They had almost reached the top before they saw Clay.

"Hello!" said the man, catching a glint of wings by the street lamp.

"I am sorry," said Clay resentfully, struggling to his feet. "I was waiting—"

"Oh, that's a damned shame," said the man. "Why didn't you ring? Miss Gregory would have let you in —unless she's gone to sleep in some corner or other. Open the door, sweet, while I help the gentleman into the hall."

Clay evaded the aid. "You don't understand—"

"Of course, my dear fellow. But can't we talk about it where it's warm? I say, you're blue with this wind. A good night for a topcoat, eh?"

"You are under a misapprehension," said Clay. "I did not—" He caught his breath under an onslaught of pain. And during the next few seconds he was too weak to fend off the other. When the red haze cleared he found they were in an office, tastefully furnished but glaring white in places. Clay fixed his glance upon an instrument case.

"I . . . I understand," said Clay. "You're a physician."

"Dr. Evanston, at your service," said the man, shedding his coat. He was, Clay saw, a young man of great vitality. And to find a doctor with such equipment so early in a career must mean— "I confess I forgot all about the appointment. The concert was superb and the encores made it last an extra half hour. But now that I'm here I trust you'll forgive me."

"Appointment?" said Clay. "But I—"

"Certainly. Captain McLean, isn't it? For ten-thirty tonight. I distinctly recall Miss Gregory accepting it." A tall, efficient-looking nurse entered at that moment and the doctor looked to her for confirmation. She smiled professionally at Clay.

"Now, old fellow," said the doctor, "let's get down to it. It's your leg, I believe you said. Tissues in the knee joint all shot to the devil and so forth. And you wouldn't mind my experimenting with the Catalyst Ray. Delighted at such faith."

"But I—" began Clay.

"Here, pull up your pants leg there like a good fellow. Ah, now—" And Evanston, shedding his tailcoat stopped in the middle of the act to regard the knee. He finished what he was doing and then began to make a thorough examination of the wound.

"Frightful job of surgery," said Evanston. "No chance for the tissues to get back. Wonder they didn't use carpet tacks, eh?" He went over to his instrument case and stood there for a long time, looking at his reflection in the glass and thinking. Finally he came back, not having gotten anything out.

"Captain," said Dr. Evanston, "it's easy to see why you've been through hell with that leg. It's never really healed. Underneath, you understand. If the joint, to be plain, has not permanently hardened, we may be able to do something about it. Of course, so far, I've only used this discovery upon animals. But if you care to take a chance with me, I assure you—"

"You think something can be done?" said Clay wildly.

"Why, it's an even chance. It might come out better or it might be worse. I make no promises."

Clay recovered a little and refused hope. "The cost, doctor—"

"I'll charge nothing for my services. Your worries on that score can be settled here and now. All it

will amount to will be your hospital and the nurse."

"And that—"

"About two hundred dollars, I should say."

"Two—Dr. Evanston, I have less than fifty and no way to get more."

"Well, then, a charity ward—"

"Charity? Again?" Clay rolled down his pants leg and braced himself up out of the chair. "No, we can dispense with charity."

"Good. Then may I see you tomorrow, say about eleven? My offices on Park Avenue— A card, Miss Gregory. There, old fellow. At eleven, then."

Clay shook his hand and somehow got out of the place. He didn't dare trust his voice until he was some distance down the walk and then, characteristically, he swore.

It was all too amazing. Who could have made that appointment? Not Laura, for she had not known his name and he had not even known hers except through that album.

If he could only walk like a man again— But two hundred dollars—

THE WHEEL whirred, a montage of numbers. The little wooden ball teased the pockets, sliding down from the bank and leaping in, only to spring instantly out and go all around once more. It was, as Clay had noted with disgust, a wheel with both zero and double zero. Americans were the only people who would play against those odds—the additional green double-zero changing the house take from one in thirty-five to one in seventeen and a half. But Clay, in his present mood, was not asking for odds. Once more he was crossing swords with his fate, and his determination not to be beaten made him feel strong enough to direct that ball just by looking at it.

Around it went. Clay's five dollar bill was crumpled up on red. With a hollow clatter the ball leaped all the way across the wheel into black, rebounded into another black and then eased into red.

The greasy-faced croupier paid the bets with swiftness, pausing sourly only when he came to the five on red.

"Let it ride," muttered Clay.

The croupier scowled at the wheel as though handing it orders. He spun the disk and flipped in the ball. The grind of it ate up the babble about the table. Noisily the sphere cracked down upon a red number and stayed there.

Again the croupier paid the bets, again he scowled at the ten dollars on red before he paid it. Tonight the crowd was mostly cheap and the ten which he must add would make, if it continued, a bad spot in his till.

The wheel whirred into life. The bets pattered down, twenty riding red, half the rest of the crowd upon black.

Clay only gave a passing glance to the wheel, knowing, somehow, that he had bullied it into giving him what he wanted. Red again.

Viciously the croupier threw twenty on top of Clay's twenty, morose instantly when he collected less than five from black. Around and around went the little ball.

Red.

"Let it ride."

"Red!"

"Let it ride."

The croupier's hands were shaking as he increased Clay's pile to three hundred and twenty dollars. Although excited gamblers were beginning to crowd about the board, laying bets on this unusual occurrence, their siding with and against Clay balanced so that the game was losing exactly what had been paid out.

And Clay, with a slight smile, counted three hundred out and let his twenty stay where it was, thus, according to the croupier's lights, robbing the game of exactly three hundred. If his sheet was to look like anything this night—

The manager came waddling over. For a moment he stood whispering to the croupier and then, benignly smiling at one and all, signaled for the game to go on.

A hulking brute of a man muttered angrily next to Clay. Around went the wheel. In the opposite direction sped the ball.

Black.

The huge fellow next to Clay roared out, "To hell with you and your wired wheels! Put a wooden ball back in there or I'll tear this place apart!" And he snatched back the bet he had lost on red.

"Take your money and clear out of here," snarled the croupier.

"Not till I've got what I would've won!"

"You know very little," said the croupier, his anger at Clay transferring to the hulking fellow. "Leave this game, or I'll have you thrown out!"

"You won't pay me my rightful win?"

"No!" shouted the croupier. "Bill!"

"To hell with that!" bellowed the big fellow. He lunged as he spoke, seizing the croupier by the throat and smashing his jaw with a fist as hard as a sledge hammer.

Screaming with pain the croupier skidded along the floor, blood spurting from his shattered face. He brought up against the next table and while the big fellow still roared in triumph the thud of a shot struck through the room.

A coil of smoke eddied up from the croupier's hand. The big fellow's fingers closed about his own throat. With amazed eyes he looked at the gun and then, spewing blood, slithered down, headfirst, to writhe and stiffen upon the floor.

Clay's fingers were closed so tightly about the roll that the top bill ripped across, unnoticed.

The silence of the place broke into a panic of sound.

Backing slowly, a question beginning to take form in his mind, Clay got through the door and out. Despite the excitement of the rush, no man struck against him on the stairs.

Then, defiantly refusing to think, Clay was on the street.

VIII.

Having passed the night hopelessly trying to answer his problems and weigh his chances of recovery, Clay was up and breakfasting at seven and on the street at eight. He wanted to go into the park and wait, hopeful that Laura might come. But he had made up his mind about that when the hours were small and dark.

There was no use getting the girl into serious trouble with her mother and no use ruining her life. If he got well and found his suspicions unfounded, then he might be able to find her again. But it must have been an impulse of pity on her part, and to harness one so lovely with the unhappy future of a cripple—Yes, if he came out of this all right he might have the right to find her once more and, though it was all he could bear to think of losing her, his determination to master his own destiny made him overreach with his will. That he could stay away gave him some small confidence in his own strength.

And then there was yet another element. With the fatal incident of the evening past there had come, de-

"You will come," the messenger mumbled in his brain. "Your master has called—"

spite him, a slight but growing idea that something was definitely wrong. He had almost been killed while walking with the professor. The croupier had been in a mood to kill and his rage had been primarily directed against Clay. Only by accident had Clay averted death.

Perhaps when he had refused, point-blank, to serve—and now he wondered if that were wholly a dream and if it might have been a hunch like false memory—and when he had run away, he had brought around him a searching imminence of disaster. He had refused and so, perhaps, the gods would kill him.

Another man, with such a strange idea, might have kept to his rooms in terror. But another man would not have been born with the conviction that a human being can combat the fates. Watchfully now, he stood by to dodge the next bolt which might search for him.

Targeted as perhaps he was, or at least until he could prove otherwise, it would be better not to place Laura in the vicinity of destruction. The professor, the gambler, these had acted as unwilling substitutes, he told himself as the conviction grew. He himself might dare the fates, but there was no use running a risk with Laura.

Pilots, whose very profession hammers hard upon the possibility of personally interested fates, whose lives are lived in a constant expectation of death, learn that while superstition might be the invention of barbarians, a wise man listens to all voices so long as no man really knows. Luck might or might not exist as a winsome lady. Luck, all the same, did astonishing things. Death often passed the incompetent by in reaching for an experienced man. Skill might help to ward away destruction, but when a man realizes that not only his own but a hundred skills are involved in his own safety, he begins to place less dependence upon his own ability and more upon his fortune.

Out of this comes two frames of mind, one the fatalistic where death is inevitable, already marked on the flight record and only waiting for its exact instant to occur. The other, rarer outlook among pilots, is a combative one born out of a belief that luck is made and that death comes only to the unwatchful.

Clay mused about it soberly, a little surprised at his own willingness to accept such things as dictates of the gods, a little amazed by the coolness with which he could consider his own chances.

But in one thing his faith was not shaken. He would get from fate what he demanded and that as long as he had strength to command his own destiny, he would live. But if he ever lost that faith—

He had been passing a truck parked at the curb where a safe was being hoisted up. He glanced disinterestedly at the block-and-tackle system and then up the face of the structure to the fifteenth floor where the temporary crane stood like a gibbet against the sky. Below it, slightly less than a floor, hung the safe, turning a little in the breeze. On the walk a crew of four men heaved industriously upon a line, grunting in rhythm, strain tightening their faces and perspiration bathing their arms.

A sudden hunch made Clay attempt to step out from under that dangling safe, for all too clearly he could visualize the impact with which it might land if the rope broke.

But the rope did not break. It was the cargo hook. The two inch piece of iron, faithful in the perform-

ance of its duties for years, wearied slowly of the weight of the safe. It bent gradually out straight.

Clay, hampered as he was, knew he could not make it. The safe sagged an inch or two and then the tackle twanged in sudden freedom.

From a height of fourteen floors plummeted the safe!

Clay tripped and attempted to recover without taking his eyes from the great black object which changed savagely from a little box to a mammoth bomb.

The crew was tumbled down with the sudden slackening of the lines. Three of them were scrambling wildly away. One lay where he had fallen, stunned by the striking of his head against the pavement.

Clay tripped again and suddenly fell from the curb. Three feet away the safe struck, making the whole street tremble under the blow, throwing out a vicious rain of concrete chips and dust.

Clay picked himself up out of the street, untouched. He was trembling a little, but he kept a tight leash upon himself.

After a while the dust settled. One part of the walk was stained red and of the fourth man there was no sign.

One of the other workmen was sitting on the curb, losing his breakfast. Yet another was screaming at the top of his voice for an ambulance to come for him while he held hard to his slightly grazed arm. The third with all the folly of panic was striving to raise the safe from the red nothingness of his friend.

As coolly as he could, Clay hobbled to the corner in search of an officer, but one, attracted by the concussion, was already coming.

"Safe fell on a chap," said Clay.

The officer sped away and Clay turned to eye a saloon sign with desire. He did not enter but continued upon his way. Angrily he stilled the trembling in his stomach.

Let whatever it was try.

Let it try!

He was still master of his own destiny. He did not lie under that safe, squashed to a red stain. He was walking here, alive, still thinking, still feeling.

He gained entire control of himself shortly after, almost but not quite, to the point of jeering at a god.

GOING a little more swiftly than was comfortable, he headed across town toward Park Avenue. It was about nine and though he would be early he felt a desire to rest awhile before he confronted a doctor for examination. A fleeting wonder crossed his mind whether he would ever reach the doctor's office.

He could not long keep up the pace and, when he had gone one of those endless blocks which run east-west in New York, his leg felt as though it had been packed in molten brass. There was a small confectionery on the corner and he was glad to settle on the narrow seat of a booth. The clerk was missing but, so glad was he to rest, Clay was grateful for the fact.

Shortly the proprietor came in, talking wildly with a short, tough little man.

"I tell you I can't pay no more," said the evident owner, entrenching himself behind the counter. "I pay all I can now. My wife, she kill me if I pay more. We got along fine until you came. You take most of my profits now!"

"Now there ain't no use getting sore, buddy," said the short, tough gentleman. "The boss says more dough and that don't mean nothin' else but more dough."

"But I got a kid on the way!

Everything would be swell if you'd leave us alone."

"That's O. K. with me, buddy. If you want this place smashed, I guess it'll have to be that way. After all, we ain't bein' unreasonable. Twenty-five bucks a week—"

"But I ain't got it! If I had it, wouldn't I get a clerk? You make me get rid of the one I got and now I can't keep open as long as I should and I lose dough."

"O. K., but I hate to have to do it." And the short, tough gentleman looked around as though visualizing the place in ruins. His bright little eyes caught on the hitherto unsuspected captain; they narrowed out of sight.

"A plant, huh?" snarled the tough gentleman, getting mixed up on his uniforms. His hand was already inside his coat before Clay could speak.

"Easy," said Clay softly. "I know nothing of your business and care less. No, that's wrong," he added, annoyed by the other's belligerence. "I understand what this is about and I think it's a damned shame. But if you think it's smart to get hard about it—"

"Look, admiral," said the tough gentleman, his hand full but still hidden, "I don't take no lip," and, when he saw the cane, he added, "from no guy with a gimpy gam especially."

Clay struggled up, his face stony and his eyes dangerous. The tough gentleman showed his hand, and it was full of rod. He started to chop down, his finger already closing on the trigger.

Instinctively Clay snatched the top of the slide, twisting it outward, toward the trigger finger in such a way that the weapon acted like an instrument of torture. There was a snap as the finger bone went and then a roar as the gun exploded. The slide scored Clay's fingers.

Screaming with rage the tough gentleman sought to free himself from the trigger guard. Calmly keeping his prisoner, Clay limped to the phone. By a dexterous twist he brought the tough gentleman begging to his knees. Clay dialed "O."

"Give me the police," said Clay.

EVEN as he spoke to the sergeant that answered he saw something was very wrong with the proprietor. The man was sprawled across his counter, one arm hanging down. But Clay could not investigate. The tough gentleman, finding little mercy, was trying hard to get free of his own gun and though he could still be held by one hand on the weapon, it required watchfulness.

The police came in a few minutes and listened to Clay's brief recital of what had taken place. With satisfaction the detective snapped his book shut.

A patrolman had been bending over the proprietor. "I don't know much about this, Joe," he said, "but I can't feel no heartbeat."

"I am a physician," said a member of the crowd which had gathered. A man in shirtsleeves edged forward and looked at the body. After a little he announced, "Seems to have died of heart failure. I should call the medical examiner, if I were you, gentlemen. The shot or the excitement—" he shrugged.

"Is that all you require of me?" said Clay to the detective.

"Sure, unless there's a trial."

"I shall probably be in the hospital or—" he checked himself on the verge of saying "the morgue."

"Well—sign the book, then. Bayler here can witness it."

Clay signed, disgusted to see that the signature was very shaky.

"You're an officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force, aintcha," said the detective.

"I was," said Clay, edging toward the door.

"Pretty cool piece of work. But I guess you get plenty of that on the other side, these days."

Clay was on the walk, the crowd parting respectfully to let him through.

He'd have to get some civvies, he told himself. He had a hundred to spare now. And—but maybe—maybe he'd need that if Evanston couldn't do anything for him.

Again he wondered if he would ever reach Evanston's office. The attempts seemed to be getting closer each time. So far his knowledge had been sufficient to get him through—

That man whose wife was just going to have a kid. The racketeer that had sent the tough gentleman wouldn't leave that store in business. But maybe the wife had a family she could return to—

Damn it, why did these things have to begin happening around him? In war men died and knew that death was part of their game. But here—the professor, the croupier, the teamster—and now that poor devil in the shop—these men had had no reason to die.

He shifted his mind from the subject with violence and tried to keep it away. But he had only two other things to think about and they both led to Laura. He wouldn't dare see her again if this chain of events did not cease.

But, then, he probably would not live that long. His cane became stuck in a subway grating. He hauled it free, conscious for a moment of the train rushing below. He hobbled on, but vaguely aware of the young woman behind him.

Suddenly there came a clatter and a shrill scream. Clay whirled just in time to see the grating tip all the way over and open and the woman vanish from sight! The scream rose to a higher pitch of agony.

Clay, sick, limped back to the edge of the awry grate. He could make out very little in the darkness below except for the black streaks of track. But he heard guards shouting and caught a blur of activity.

The wave of illness passed. Grimly he looked at the iron bars which had so swiftly opened. His mind was too frozen to analyze why these things had seen fit to slip under the light weight of a woman when his own weight, but a moment before, had been on this exact spot. And although he had almost lost his cane to this grate, certainly that slight tug could not have disarranged anything so heavy.

Why had this trap delayed fire? Why had it taken another instead of himself?

He gave an uneasy glance at the heavens, half expecting to see a face leering at him. But the clouds up there were drifting calmly, wholly aloof from this tumultuous world. He felt a pang. Up there—

But he would never fly again unless—

This woman, who probably had everything to live for, had been taken. Coincidence might have accounted for the first and even the second accidents. But now five times death had struck within a few feet of him, narrowly missing him.

The noise below was growing, but he could get nothing but a blur through the grate. Abruptly the clamor stilled under the command of a stronger voice.

"Please clear away. This woman is badly injured but will probably

live. If you take the local, you will help."

The noise revived in a more subdued key.

So she was alive, then. Injured—badly.

He felt a wave of pity for her. He knew what it was to be injured, a cripple, unable to meet the world on its own footing. Maybe she had kids and a husband—maybe a sweetheart or a father— Bills, injury meant.

He was suddenly animated, going as swiftly as he could toward the steps which led underground. The people were coming up but he had no difficulty making his way to the platform.

In the dim gloom he saw the group inside the turnstiles. He paid a nickel to go through and came nearer to them. Somebody had spread out some newspapers for the girl to lie upon and a subway guard had put his rolled coat under her head. Her face was gray under new dirt and her frock was torn. There was a deep gash across her arm, and her leg, from the way it lay, was broken.

Clay had a flicker of hope. Then the train had not run over her. He felt glad for her.

"Get along, you."

He looked at the guard. "She'll live, won't she?"

"I ain't no doctor, pal. Clear off, willyuh?"

The girl's eyelids flickered and then, with returning consciousness she tried to sit up. The guard bade her lie still in a soothing voice.

"But you've got to let me go," she pleaded. "Ralph is coming home. The train may be in now! Please let me go. I'm all right." When she struggled to rise again her eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted. A small trickle of blood dripped from her lips.

Clay waited until the stretcher had come, standing back in the hope that he would not be observed. The interne made an examination of the leg.

His driver produced splints and they made her ready to be moved.

"Will she be all right?" said Clay, coming nearer.

"She'll live unless something's smashed that I can't see," growled the interne. And then, seeing who had spoken, added, "Think I'm a fortuneteller?"

"Ralph," she whimpered. "I'll meet you— You've waited for years I know. Nothing will bar it now—"

"Give her a shot," said the interne to the driver. "Take it easy, miss. You're O. K."

But she had fainted again.

"Hope she's strong enough," growled the interne. "Powell likes them plenty strong when he goes in for amputation."

"Yeah," said the driver.

"Nothing left of this leg," added the interne. "Come on, fellow, easy does it." And they lifted her on to the stretcher.

Clay stood helplessly aside and then, with a sudden impulse, kept pace with the stretcher. Her pocketbook was lying by her head and the interne howled a protest when Clay snatched it. And then the interne gasped and gaped. For into the purse Clay thrust a wad of bills.

Stopping at the top, Clay watched them load her into the ambulance.

"Three hundred dollars," he said bitterly. "What's that in exchange for a leg?" And bowed by the futility of the gesture he turned

away, continuing his journey to Park Avenue.

CLAY HAD GONE some distance when he began to wonder what Evanston would say when he found that Clay did not have any money. He did not at all regret his gift, he only wondered what to do. That the problem had a solution he did not doubt. For, as he went along, his courage began to stiffen and there came back to him his resolution never to be bested, his belief in his own control of his own destiny.

He paused for rest at the corner, leaning against a trash can with his hand. His attention was so absorbed in the bewildering events which had happened about him that, at first, he did not see what lay in plain sight upon the top of the waste papers.

Finally, when his eyes did focus on the objects, he did not instantly comprehend, but rather took them for granted. They registered sharply, then, and, instinctively, he looked around for their owner. But there weren't any people immediately near that had any interest in a trash can.

Curious, he lifted the loose bills out. They were tens and twenties, none of them crisp or new. Just average bills, wadded up as though cast away in disgust.

He started to count them and get them in order, every now and then expecting a person to step up and say they were his. But no one paid him any attention and he finished the count.

Even then he did not realize what had happened. Here in his hand he held eight hundred and fifty-five dollars in cash, cast away in a trash can, in plain sight and without any claimers!

The bank behind him seemed the answer. Clay, without any thought of keeping the money, went in through the doors with the bills in his hand.

He stepped up to the expanse of desks beyond a counter and a young man briskly greeted him.

"These bills," said Clay. "I wonder if the bank has lost any such sum."

The young man stared at him suspiciously, taking note of the uniform and the pilot wings and the cane. Only these made him civil, for he was rather alarmed at Clay's pallor and his trembling fingers.

"I shall find out immediately," said the official.

Clay waited for some time before he became aware of the guards standing on either side of him. The young man came hustling back.

"No such loss," he said.

Clay handed over a few of the bills. "Then they're counterfeit, eh?"

The official examined them and at length shook his head. "No, they're real enough." He sighed. "Major, I do not know what game this is, and I must request you to please leave this bank."

Startled, Clay looked from the young man to the guards who began to edge him out. Clay shrugged, almost laughed. He thrust the money into his tunic pocket and left.

For some time he lingered near the trash can, for he still felt that he had no claim whatever on the money. Presently the street department truck pulled to the curb on its regular morning rounds and dumped the can.

"I beg pardon," said Clay, "but if any money happened to be in that can—"

"Look, mister," said the white wing on the walk. "There never

ain't no money in this can or any other can. O. K., Juan, I got it."

The truck ground off and left Clay still on watch. Shortly a very shabby old woman came scuttling up to the can and looked anxiously into it. She gave a deep sigh of disappointment and turned away, almost running into Clay.

"Beg pardon," said Clay. "Did you, by any chance, lose any money in that can?"

Her ink-spot eyes screwed up as they took him in and she edged suspiciously around him.

"I meant no harm," said Clay.

"Can't a woman look for today's paper without bein' mashed by a sojer?" she screamed, speeding away.

In a few minutes a car drew up to the curb and a middle-aged fellow with a mustache leaped out and looked into the can. He turned and said to a companion still inside, "It's gone."

Clay stepped forward. "Beg pardon, but if you're looking for money —"

The man stared blankly at him and then muttered, "So that's what war does to 'em, eh?" And, shaking his head, scrambled back into the car. Clay heard him saying, "Y'see? You *can* make 'em get up on their toes by bawlin' them out. Alvin sayin' that they was slackin' up was all wrong. Here it's only ten forty-five—" The car went away.

A finger tapped Clay on the shoulder. "Look, general," said the cop on the beat, "it's none of my business, but the bank had me come over to nudge you along. What's doing?"

"I found some money in this trash can," said Clay.

"Well, general, if you found any money in that trash can, keep it and stop givin' the financial wizards the blooies. Move along."

"O. K.," shrugged Clay.

IX.

THE EVENTS of the day—and the day was not yet spent—had worn Clay's nerves to a point where he could not hold a cigarette steady enough to light it. He was trying when Dr. Evanston came into his sumptuous waiting room and bade Clay enter the inner chamber.

Evanston's intelligent eyes studied the captain as he held the door for him. Clay sank down upon a bench beside the wall and gazed at the operating table.

"I say, what's the matter?" said Evanston. "You look done in."

"Nothing," said Clay.

"If it's the money for the hospital—" began Evanston.

"I have plenty of that. No, I didn't steal it."

Evanston applied his stethoscope to Clay's bared chest and then stood back questioningly. "Heart hammering like a machine gun. Something has happened to you and as your physician—"

"Some accidents, that's all. Got under my skin, I guess."

"Oh," said Evanston. "Saw somebody—"

A tray of instruments was receiving attention from the office nurse. She set them down with a clatter and Clay jumped half out of his chair. Sheepishly, Clay looked at Evanston.

"Doctor, I'd be ungrateful if I covered this up. Several times in the past two days, yesterday and this morning that is, I've walked on the edge of oblivion. You say that I should be used to such things what with my profession and all. I . . . I don't quite know how to tell you.

I've . . . well . . . had a disagreement with . . . well, call it a nightmare, if you wish. Since that time things have happened around me, accidents which evidently sought to wipe me out—"

"Overwrought nerves," said Evanston.

"I don't think I imagined the occurrences. I've seen four people die and one injured. Any one of these might have taken me instead of them. You, on whom I am depending for any chance of recovery, must know about these things. I walk close to the edge and those about me—"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. A chain of coincidences. In this modern day of science such things are completely discounted. Calm yourself, captain. I'll take my chances." And with an indulgent smile he went back to the examination.

Presently the nurse came in with a printed slip of paper.

"Will you sign that?" said Evanston. "Routine, you know. A release for me in case anything happens to you. Wait. You must know that this is just an experiment. While my ray works well on animals, it has never been tried on a human being. I may be able to benefit all humanity, even make the old young again. But we must find out and, captain, you are the first."

Clay signed the slip.

"And now, let's be getting over to the hospital. I believe they have everything ready by now. My equipment has been there for several days. Needs their transformers and so on, you know. Shall we be off, captain?"

"Yes," said Clay.

ELEVEN DAYS later, Clay awoke from a doze, shortly before Evanston was due in the evening. He stretched, savoring his ease of mind and comfort of body as though they were something which must be taken on the instant and might disappear without warning.

In exuberance, then, he kicked down with his leg and grinned to find that it gave him no twinge. Of course it was not wholly well, for Evanston had had to operate before he could apply his tissue catalyst, but both were certain that within the next fortnight, aside from a scar, Clay would never know he had been wounded. His right arm, too, had received some additional attention, for Evanston had wanted to make the bullet mark there vanish—and now there was little sign of where a 20 mm. slug had torn through.

But more than this bodily luxury was Clay's calmness of mind. For eleven days nothing had happened and he had grown sure that whatever it was had given up. For what could be simpler than to do away with a man in a hospital? The wrong medicine, a dropped cigarette, a spark from Evanston's generators—any of these things could have done him in—and none of them had happened.

Either, he told himself, whatever it was had given up or the whole series had been a chain of coincidence. And now in his physical well-being, he could not tolerate speculation upon disaster. He pushed it out of his mind and held it away.

Laura occupied his thoughts for now what would hinder? Somehow he could get around her mother. Somehow he could earn his living and take care of the girl as she should be. Ahead of him stretched a long vista of happiness without, so far as he could see, the slightest chance of a mar.

Evanston came in and sank down

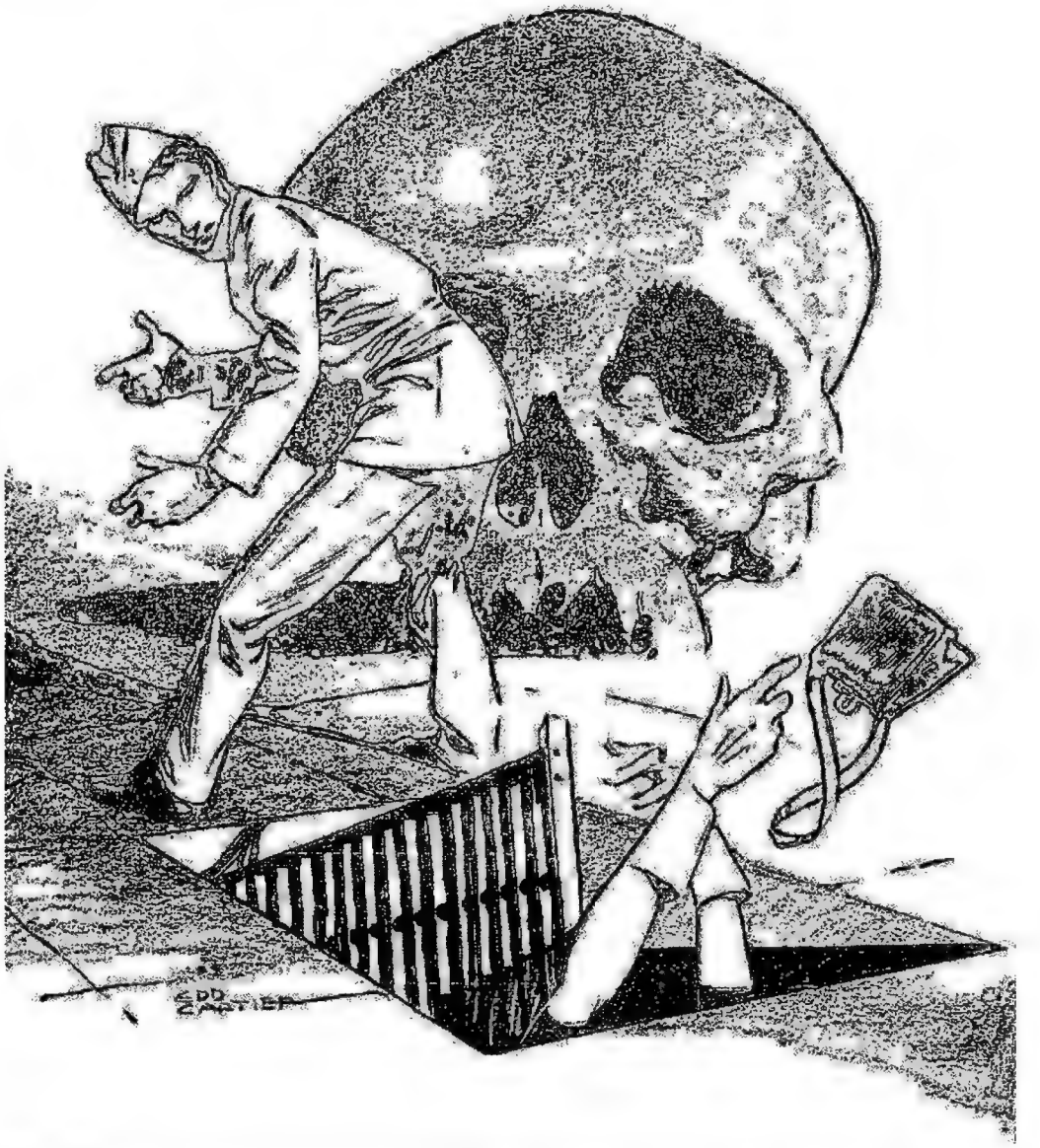
on the chair beside the bed. He looked a little tired. "That's the penalty, Clay. I make more money than I can spend and I never have time to spend any."

"There are compensations, aren't there?" said Clay.

"Oh, indeed there are. To save lives which would otherwise go to waste is ample reward. And, without conceit, I think I can count such savings in the hundreds over a period of four years. But being a miracle man also has its drawbacks. I've always wanted to take my wife on a trip around the world. Perhaps I shall, some day. Perhaps my ray will free me from my practice and do my saving by proxy. Well! Enough about me. What about you?"

"Never felt better," said Clay.

Evanston pulled back the sheet and inspected the leg. A little proud,



He whirled as the grating clanked behind him. Missed! Death had missed him again—

he made Clay flex it, watching his face for any trace of pain.

"Bravo," said Evanston. "You'll be roller skating or dancing in a week or two, and mountaineering in a month."

"Doc—"

"Yes?"

"You think it's possible . . . maybe . . . that I'll be able to fly again—"

"Ho! Well, my boy, I don't *think*, *I know*. Nothing is wrong with your eyes and your reactions are all perfect, aren't they?"

"Yes, but my leg—"

"Is all right, too."

Clay felt dizzy. To fly again! To feel the swift rush of wind against his face, to hear the thunder of horsepower—

"By the way," said Evanston, "I put a little note in the paper about the success of this thing. I hope you won't mind."

"Mind? Why should I?"

"You seem to have had quite a record with the Canadians. *The Times* had a file on you. Five planes, I believe, three of them bombers. Right?"

"That's what they tell me," said Clay.

"Made a nice story. I'll have a copy sent up to you. Anything you want?"

"Not that you can produce."

"Oh. The lady, eh?"

"Yes."

"Rather outside my sphere when you don't even know her address or her last name. Well, keep up the good work."

"Don't wear yourself out," smiled Clay.

Evanston closed the door behind him and left Clay in near ecstasy. To fly again!

And they had said that he never would. But how could the army doctors know of Evanston?

Dazed with delight he hardly marked the passage of time and thought, when he heard the knock, that it must be the nurse with the paper Evanston had said he would send.

"Come in," he called.

Someone moved in the darkness beside him, a vague silhouette against the dim lights of the corridor. Clay reached out to take the paper but, instead, found a hand.

THE ELECTRIC shock of that contact could mean only one thing. But he could not understand—

"Laura!"

If she had come to suppose, as she had, that she might be but an unhappy event in his life, her doubts fled now. For the caress and happy surprise he put into her name carried more meaning than an hour's protesting of his love.

Holding his hand in both her own she dropped down beside him. In the darkness he could see the bright tears of gladness in her eyes.

Laura.

"I thought you must be dead. I could not believe you would forget to come—"

"I came here the next morning," said Clay, keeping his voice calm with an effort. "I had no way to leave you word—"

"For two days I waited for you. I went into the park and when you did not come I asked all around if anyone knew where you lived. Somehow I found the place and your landlady said that she did not know where you had gone. And then I could not go back to the park—"

"I've been thoughtless."

"No. I understand, perhaps better than you do. My mother—"

"Let's not talk about her."

"But we must. She would never permit you—"

"That will never be again, my darling."

With sudden premonition he sat up, clutching her shoulder. "She's dead."

"Yes."

"That night—"

"No. Two days after. It's a foolish thing, perhaps, even a heartless thing but . . . but the only thing I could think about was losing you. You have not changed? You still—"

"Darling." And he stopped her lips with his palm. His hands lived vibrantly at the touch of her lips. "How did she die?"

"Must you know?"

"Yes."

"Her physician denied her sweets and she got into a rage. Apoplexy. She never regained consciousness."

He sank back with relief. "Two days. And that night?"

"She was not really angry. She . . . she was a cruel old woman in many ways. It made her happy, if anything, to find a way to abuse me. Oh, I know it's horrible for me to talk this way but you are giving me your pity and I don't deserve it. She lived like she died, in petty violence. Once, while father was alive, she was good and kind, if a little stiff. But after that— Please don't talk about it."

"I am sorry."

"I want to know about *you*," said Laura. "Tonight in *The Times* I read how Doctor Evanston had healed a Canadian officer and I lost little time in calling his home. His nurse there said you had been brought here. Oh, dearest, is it true?"

"Yes."

"It made no difference to me but I knew how unhappy you were and how you would always believe that only my pity had brought me close to you—"

"I can fly again!"

She laughed joyfully with him, causing a nurse to pause at the door, frowning. The nurse entered with disapproval and lighted the table lamp. With a sniff she stalked away.

Clay and Laura laughed at her and at each other. And then Clay sobered. The beauty of Laura was like a hypnotic spell. And laughter made her radiant.

"Laura."

"Yes?"

"There's something I must tell you."

A trace of alarm crept into her voice, brought there by his sudden solemnity. "Please, darling. Can't it wait?"

"No. Laura, the night I left you and the following day, several things happened. I must tell you. Although it seems that I am free now, for forty-eight hours I was a very definite liability." And he began to describe to her what had happened.

In her turn she stopped his lips. "What relief you bring me."

"What?"

"I thought you were going to say that you already had three wives at least. I am sorry, very sorry, for your misery over these things. But the world is mostly unhappy. Death is all around always. Coincidence brought it very close to you. You had nothing to do with these things. I am a woman and women are supposed to be very soft-hearted. But, in reality, they are not, only in so far as those they love are concerned."

"Then—you aren't afraid?"

"Of you?" And she laughed. "Only of what you might do with my heart."

"But perhaps this shadow is real. Perhaps I shall be killed—"

"You aren't afraid of death, Clay McLean."

"Not more than ordinarily anyway."

"Then forget about this."

"You seem so certain, Laura."

"Perhaps because I am so happy."

"Laura."

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

"I would have married you twelve days ago."

"Then—"

"Tomorrow morning I shall get a new dress."

"You mean that you would marry me *here?*" he cried happily.

"Before you have a chance to change your mind."

He dragged her down to him and lost himself in her kiss.

X.

A MONTH later, less two days, Clay McLean came swinging up the avenue, looking very unlike the man who had stepped into Evanston's house such a short time before to find an appointment made for him. In fact the resemblance was so difficult to place that the hunchback newspaper vender on the corner across from the park was popeyed at the change, for at first he had not recognized Clay at all.

"But gee, captain, youse looks like a couple other fellers, no kiddin'!" He surveyed Clay with a toothy grin. "Youse has gotten fat! And say, youse ain't wearin' your old duds neither. What outfit is youse wit' now?" He gazed fixedly at the blue cap. "Drivin' a bus, maybe?"

"No," smiled Clay, paying over a nickel for a two-cent paper. "But almost as bad." Tucking the paper under his arm he went striding on up the street.

There was absolutely no sense of his walking this distance, for he had gotten off the subway two stations short. But as long as he could extract any thrill at all from being able to walk swiftly and certainly he would continue to do so. His stride was exaggerated but purposely.

Whistling, he came in sight of the grim old woman of a house. He was warm from his long and fast walk and eager to spring in and tell Laura the grand news, but he had to stop in wonder. What made the old place look so different? Grim it still was but less so to a point which must soon vanish at this rate.

He ran up the steps, three at a time, and sent the big door thundering open.

Laura came to the top of the wide stairs and waved at him. She had a towel wrapped around her head and a voluminous apron about her and there was a smudge on her cheek. Behind her the little Irish maid brightly smiled her welcome, though the soot and suds about her almost obscured her entirely.

"Come down here!" shouted Clay.

"Never!" said Laura.

"You come down here or I'll come up there!"

"But I've got to change!" wailed Laura. "We've been tearing this place to bits—"

Clay raced up the stairs and only quick movement on Laura's part allowed her to escape into her bedroom. She succeeded in bolting the door on him, calling out, "You ought to be ashamed, trying to make me expose the sordid side of my life."

Clay let go of the knob and prowled back and forth, the little Irish maid grinning at him.

"You ought to know better than

to catch a woman with her hair down, Mr. Clay."

"Go away or I'll drown you in that bucket," growled Clay, making a movement toward her. "Oh, what's this?" The sight of the room beyond halted him. The place had been very dark and dreary before but now new wallpaper and a vigorous brush had transformed it.

"You aren't supposed to see 'em till they're finished, Mr. Clay. This is the last one. We got the furniture moved into the parlor just this afternoon and tomorrow the painters are comin' to do the upstairs—this room anyway, your bedroom bein' finished."

"Marvelous," said Clay. "Why . . . why this place looks like another house."

"It *is* another house, Mr. Clay."

He heard Laura's step behind him and turned swiftly to meet her. As always when he saw her after even the briefest of absences, he was stunned by her beauty. He could not believe that she was really his, no more than he could believe without constantly testing that he was well and whole once more.

The little Irish maid politely slid down the steps to leave them alone.

After a little, Laura drew back from him and gazed at him with wonder. "Your cap—your jacket and—"

"These," said Clay, impressively pointing to his single gold sleeve stripe and then to his wings, "mean, simply, that Clay McLean, having passed all required tests, is now a future chief pilot of East-West Airlines."

"Oh, Clay! How marvelous!"

"Of course I'm just a copilot right now, for I've lost my rating. But I'll be up there just the same, pushing them through storm and fog and ice—*yay!*"

"Clay, we've got to celebrate!"

"Right! The Great White Way can—"

"Can blaze for the suckers," said Laura. "We'll celebrate by having ice cream for supper. Ice cream and . . . . and Napoleon brandy. You remember our first supper?"

"Could I forget?"

"I got the silver all wrong and the flowers were too large and the candles smoked—"

"It was lovely. And you're lovely."

"Now, now, now. If we eat at all, I have to be on the job."

"Yes, your ladyship."

She led him down the stairs and into the parlor. What a change had come over the place! It was all light and clean and comfortable.

"Where's the album?" demanded Clay.

"The album? Why in Heaven's name—"

"You go fish it out of the trash can and put it right back here on the table."

"Tomorrow."

"Now."

"But Clay—"

"If you ever get uppity with me, what would I do if I couldn't show you Laura, aged three?"

She laughed and hauled the book out from behind the others in the case and dutifully placed it on the table. Then she took his cap and, pushed him into a deep chair. With some astonishment he saw a pipe on the table, loaded.

Laura hauled his feet up on a stool and began to divest him of his shoes.

"Hey! Wait!"

"Quiet, sir. In all the best of circles, the man comes home and his wife has his slippers out and his pipe filled and his paper ready."

He didn't. She put the paper into his hands and made him spread it open and then went on changing shoes to slippers. Smiling she looked up at the expanse of white newspaper. Suddenly her face lost its laughter, first from her eyes, then from her mouth. She turned a little white. Somehow she finished the task of the slippers.

"I don't know," she said with forced gaiety, "that I like the paper part of it." And so saying, she swept it from his hands. He made a grab for it but she won.

"And now your pipe."

"But—"

"I said pipe!" She held out a light for him and, resignedly he puffed until it was going.

She scooped up the paper and held it behind her. "I've decided that as long as you're going to be mean about the album, you're going to read nothing but the album, for tonight, at least." Above his protest she marched from the room.

Clay puffed at the pipe, taking it out and glancing distrustfully at it. Then, seeing that Laura was gone, he laid it thankfully aside and lighted a cigarette. Happily, he picked up the album, but his eyes were for the wonderful change that had come over this room.

Out in the hall Laura collected the paper he had brought home with him, relieved to find it had not been opened. Swiftly she made her way back to the kitchen.

Standing beside the stove she looked once more at the item on the back page.

DR. EVANSTON DIES.
CAN HEALTH RAY KILL?

Dr. E. V. Evanston died this afternoon at his office on Park Avenue. Remarkable cure of a Canadian officer, Captain Clayton McLean—fellow doctors puzzled—certain ray must have other actions—probably abandon experiments—survived by his wife—

Tight-lipped and trying to fight down her question, Laura thrust the newspapers into the trash burner.

XI.

COPILOT MCLEAN sat comfortably back in his seat, listening to the gentle mutter of the idling motors. Before him spread an expanse of instruments, each one telling its own correct story, the whole informing him that the plane was ready to go.

The pilot, Wayne Stoddard, stood on the apron, smoking his last cigarette and watching the passengers enter as a good captain should. Clay saw him turn and smile up at him and smiled back. Wayne Stoddard was a little flattered to have *the* Clayton McLean as a lowly copilot for, like many commercial fliers, he was a little restless in the echo of war birds across the water.

Clay eyed the passengers and found them a usual lot. A fat Hollywood producer on his way home via Chicago, an advertising man already getting his face in order to meet a new client, a bank official trying to look as though he was really the bank president, a bright old lady on her way to see her son and anxious for everybody to know that he was in charge of the Great Lakes Training Station or at least had something to say about it, a movie bit player being blasé but straining to get the producer's notice, an F.B.I. man attempting to appear inconspicuous, a shoe manufacturer looking at everybody's feet, two girls taking their first plane ride but making sure everyone thought they had done it lots of times before, and a weary wife on her way to Reno. The stewardess was greeting

each one of them by name, trusting that she had read their reservations right and that she knew the old travelers' pet requirements and that she could answer all their questions.

Finally all the baggage was aboard and the door had been tightly shut. The pilot ground out his cigarette and mounted to his post of command. But halfway up the dispatcher called to him and came running out with a sheet of paper. The pilot consulted it, looked steadily into the west and then shrugged. He put the sheet in his pocket and climbed up once more. He waved to the dispatcher and settled into his seat.

"She look all right to you, Clay?"

"Check."

"Dirty weather over the mountains but I don't think it will get any worse. Early morning soup usually gets off the hump by the time we get there. Fly it with my eyes shut, anyway."

"All clear," yelled somebody outside.

Wayne took the wheel into his chest. His deft hand shot both throttles ahead and hauled them back. The engines sent the dust scurrying behind them. He let off his brakes and brought the ship around, gunning it out on to the runway. He surveyed the wind situation.

"O. K.?"

"All clear," said Clay.

The *DN-160* began to rumble along the concrete. Wayne kicked the throttles wide and pushed the wheel up against the panel. The tail came off smoothly. Wayne eased the wheel back. The landing gear crunched a few times more and then, shaking itself and flying clean, they were away, the port sloping away behind them.

"Wheels," said Wayne.

Clay switched on the automatic gear. A light blinked.

"In," said Clay.

"Check," said Wayne.

They both settled back for the long grind.

"Must seem pretty tame to you," said Wayne. "Two hundred m.p.h. after a Vickers Spitfire."

"Seems pretty darned good," said Clay.

"Deadly dull, though," said Wayne.

"No. I don't think so."

"You will soon enough. New York to Chi, Chi to New York. No guns or bombs, just passengers. Deadly dull."

"I'll love it," said Clay.

"Even when," said a voice over his shoulder, "Mrs. Tenderguts wants you to fly a little smoother?"

Clay smiled at the stewardess, a good kid by the name of Cartwright.

"Even then," said Clay.

"Well, she's saying it right now. She wants to arrive in Reno with that schoolgirl complexion. She insisted I tell you, Wayne. Her ex owns stock in some airline but she isn't sure if it's this one."

"Go back and find out," said Wayne. "We'll act accordingly."

"Get me some weather," said Wayne. "And be sure it's good weather."

"O. K., skipper," said Clay.

SOMETIME later Clay was at the controls while Wayne tried his luck on the weather. About them tendrils of mist had begun to thicken and for long moments, the earth vanished completely from view. The engines thundered strongly.

Wayne put aside the phones. "We better beeline on the beam," he said, perhaps a little too naturally.

Clay shot him a questioning glance.

"She's settling up ahead," said Wayne. "Wind shifted and some dirty stuff swung inland from the lakes."

"And on the hump—"

"On the hump," said Wayne.

"Thought you said this was deadly dull."

Wayne smiled and watched the lights.

"How about the soup?" said Cartwright. "Mr. Colossal-Stupendous objects, said he looked the weather up before we took off and no soup."

"He read the wrong menu," said Wayne. "We're on the beam and all's well."

"O. K., skipper," said Cartwright. She gave Clay a winsome smile and then happened to remember that Clay was married and so heaved a little sigh of remorse. She vanished back into the cabin.

"Want me to take it?" said Wayne.

"As you will," said Clay.

"Carry on, then," said Wayne. "If I do say so, you got the feel of her quick. No pursuit stuff but she'll do, eh?"

"Right," said Clay. "But it's no credit in smooth stuff like this."

"Mind going it black?"

Clay looked down. More frequently now the earth was vanishing and staying hidden longer so that, in a short while, there were whole minutes when there was nothing to be seen but a carpet of dirty gray.

"Steady her at four thousand," said Wayne. "No use to freeze them to death just yet." He looked out at his engines and sat back in confidence. All the instruments were reading right, and what was a little dirty weather when you'd been flying it dog-oh all year and had just this trip gotten a daylight run for a change? When Clay settled at four thousand, Wayne nodded to himself. This man could fly! And these modern, streamlined bullets didn't have any too many flying qualities either.

The area around them drew in until it became so much cotton batting, chewed up by the props but otherwise apparently sluggish.

"I'll take her," said Wayne.

Clay let her go and rubbed his arms for a moment. In the instant after he had released the ship and before Wayne got the feel of her again they slammed around like a die in a cup.

"She's rough all right," said Wayne.

Clay took up a headphone and called Summit. "Flight 21. Wayne Stoddard. Heading over the hump. What's ceiling, please."

"Summit calling Flight 21. Calling Flight 21—" A crash of lightning blasted the voice out for a moment.

"Come in, Summit," said Clay.

"Weather on the ground. Wind increasing in velocity to strength six from northeast."

"O. K., Summit."

"O. K., Twenty-one."

"On the ground," said Clay. "All the way down and sitting on the peaks."

Wayne boosted the ship up two thousand feet and leveled off at six. "Fly it with my eyes closed," he muttered. "Been doing it all year. We must be over Fayburg."

"Want a position."

"W-e-l-l—"

"Summit," said Clay. "Calling Summit."

A violent blast of static blotted the answering voice.

"Calling Summit," persisted Clay. "Calling Summit. Flight 21 calling Summit—"

"There's a dead spot in here. Try to get Chicago," said Wayne.

"Calling Chicago. Flight 21 calling Chicago. Calling Chicago—" For several minutes he kept it up but only the crash of lightning somewhere around them came through the earphones.

"Doesn't matter," said Wayne, a little grimly. "We're about thirty miles from Summit . . . with this wind— Say, is the oil pressure falling, there?"

Clay's eyes shot to the gauge. "Only a little."

"But both engines—Clay, we've got to go lower. It's colder than I thought up here. See, we're heating up."

Clay swept the board with restless eyes. Temperature was climbing, pressure was going down as the lubricant thinned. He wiped a hand over the misty glass and peered back at the leading edge of their wing.

"Ice," he said.

WAYNE'S hand brought the throttles back a little. "Too much for her— Fly it with my eyes shut — What the hell's a little ice?" He lost about a thousand feet and smoothed it out again.

"Calling Summit," said Clay. "Calling Summit. Flight 21 calling Summit."

"Come in, Twenty-one," said Summit through the crackle.

"Flight 21," said Clay. "Ice forming on wings—"

"Can't hear you, Twenty-one."

Clay cut from phone to key and streamed out an even flight of code. "F-l-i-g-h-t T-w-e-n-t-y o-n-e W-a-y-n-e S-t-o-d-d-a-r-d. I-c-i-n-g u-p a-t f-i-v-e t-h-o-u-s-a-n-d o-n b-e-a-m a-b-o-u-t t-w-e-n-t-y m-i-l-e-s e-a-s-t o-f y-o-u. E-n-g-i-n-e-s h-e-a-t-i-n-g. G-e-t u-s a b-e-a-r-i-n-g t-o m-a-k-e s-u-r-e."

"It'll take them awhile," said Wayne. "But what do we care about it when we've got the beam and some of this wind on our tail? Port engine still heating and we can't go any lower without dusting the trees."

"It must be getting colder," said Clay, looking again at the forming ice.

"F-L-I-G-H-T T-W-E-N-T-Y-O-N-E," buzzed the receiver. "G-r-o-u-n-d v-e-l-o-c-i-t-y t-h-i-r-t-y-o-n-e m-i-l-e-s n-o-r-t-h-e-a-s-t. E-m-e-r-g-e-n-c-y f-i-e-l-d e-i-g-h-t m-i-l-e-s w-e-s-t h-e-r-e a-t S-u-m-m-i-t b-u-t e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g o-n t-h-e g-r-o-u-n-d. T-r-y t-o m-a-k-e i-t o-v-e-r t-h-e h-u-m-p."

"We'll make it all right all right," said Wayne heavily. "We've got five hundred feet under us here if this damned altimeter isn't lying. I'm going to sit on the carpet. It can't be that bad down there—"

"What's wrong?"

"The beam cut out."

"I've got us checked."

"Plot us a course. I've got the compass here, but that wind—I wish that gauge would settle down." And he eased the throttles another notch. "Damned streamlined bombs— Old airmail, that was the ticket. Flew themselves. The hell we can't have a ship that flies like the old Monomail— No field within a hundred miles long enough to land us."

"Any news for the paying customers?" said Cartwright.

"Everything's swell," said Wayne. "But tell them to buckle their belts. Bumpy air just ahead. Too many trucks been over it."

She shot Clay a white glance but he didn't offer more. Her eyes strayed over the instrument panel with the wish that she could read the trouble. She drew back.

"Good kid, Cartwright," said Wayne. "Marry her if she didn't think she rated an actor at least.

The ice bore down, and the rocks soared up—and Captain McLean knew Death was reaching out for him again—

Monomail was the ship. No monkey suits—"

Clay looked at the wing again. The ice was very distinct now and thickening even as he looked. "It's snowing here."

Wayne gave the port engine an angry glance and then, tight-jawed, stabbed the throttles all the way forward. The altimeter stopped easing down the dial and began to build up from four thousand, but very slowly.

"Jettison me a couple passengers," growled Wayne.

Very slowly the temperature gauges came up into the red. The tachs began to slope off and kept on going down. The pressure gauges were dropping out of sight and the altimeter stopped building.

Wayne wobbled the stick as though he could make the plane shake like a dog and shed its growing weight of ice. Clay got back to the key.

"Tell them we are losing altitude," said Wayne. "Tell them to start whistling about a bearing. We've got to get into Summit and there's nothing beyond. Tell them to get a plane that can fly. It won't do any good, but they're nosy."

"O. K., skipper." And Clay, sending smoothly, looked into the face of the altimeter, which was going down, down, down to the level of the hump and then below. In the glass he didn't see Wayne's reflection but Laura's.

"F-l-i-g-h-t T-w-e-n-t-y-o-n-e. C-a-l-l-i-n-g S-u-m-m-i-t."

"Come in, Twenty-one," said the phones.

Clay spoke into the mike. "Flight 21 calling Summit. Steadily losing altitude from ice. Engines heating up. Get us a bearing. That's all."

"'That's all' is right," muttered Wayne. "Fly it blotto, though. Who said those de-icers were perfect? Not in stuff like this. Mother wanted me to be a preacher. She was right." Mechanically he was doing all he could and the ache of fighting this air on the top of the range was showing strain in his face and hands. "Ought to have married Cartwright."

THE TEMPERATURE gauges were too high to read now and the tachs were trembling just above flying speed. The plane felt heavy with all the unwarranted load she had to carry and the controls were getting sloppy.

"Flight 21. Head due south into the clear," crackled Summit. "Due south from where you are right now. There are peaks ahead of you and behind you. Due south for fifteen miles and then a hundred and ninety-two degrees and you're out of it. Don't swerve off that course."

"Due south it is," said Clay. "We'll stay in a valley if we take it at a hundred and eighty, skipper."

Wayne nodded and smiled. He banked steeply and when he started to level off, he swore. The controls were cocked over. "Ice in an aileron," said Wayne. "Grab hold."

The two of them battled to level the plane out while the altimeter crept down, down, down.

The wheel came free with a jerk. Wayne settled the compass on a hundred and eighty. The whole panel was reading crash now. Clay could feel them losing.

"Some day they'll have speed and a plane," said Wayne. "Your belt fastened?"

"Rather not, skipper."

"O. K. Get Summit again."

Clay tried, but Summit was dead as far as they were concerned.

"Make it yet," said Wayne.

"Sure," said Clay.

Cartwright was between them. "What's up?"

"Get back and buckle your belt, if you can find one," said Wayne. "We may make it and we may not."

"O. K., skipper."

"And, Cartwright," said Wayne, calling her back, "if you'd listened to my plea a couple months ago you'd be sitting home, now, knitting."

"O. K., skipper."

"Cartwright!" said Wayne.

"Yes, skipper?"

"Any pilot's a chump to fall in love with a stewardess."

"*Wayne*, do you—"

"And buckle your belt," said Wayne.

"That altimeter's lying," said Clay. "We're below sea level."

"Sure. Never told the truth for a minute in its whole life. They can have their altimeters. Just give me a plane that can fly. Stand by the stick. You may see something before I do. I feel trees."

Clay wrapped his hands around his wheel.

"River through here. Iced up. Might hit it square, slick as you please. Mind if I cut the guns, Clay?".

"No use to melt this starboard engine. Must be dripping by now."

Wayne shut the guns and cut the switches. The silence which began to settle made the ears ache. In a moment they could hear the moan of their wings. The *DN-160* was dropping swiftly, "like a streamlined brick."

Clay reached forward to clear the glass. His hand took one swipe and before him leaped a rock higher than the plane. "Bank!" he cried. But the word was swallowed up completely in the crash.

XII.

It was dusk of the following day when Clay finished his report in the New York office. He looked very white and worn but there was a stubborn set about his jaw. It was plain, to him, that fate had again missed its prey.

"When we hit," he said to the circle of officials, "there wasn't time to bank away from the pinnacle that we struck. We were only about two hundred feet from the center of the stream and Wayne . . . Wayne was figuring almost right. There wasn't anything he could do—"

"About yourself," said an official, promptingly.

"Gentlemen," said the physician attending, "this man has had a severe shock. He walked miles in the snow before he got to a road and he led a rescue party all the way back. The only rest he's had has been on the train. Can't you let this thing rest until morning?"

"I want to get it over," said Clay, and he continued. "Evidently I was thrown clear, on the right of the rock. Soft snow must have broken my fall and I evidently received no more than these few bruises going through the glass. I must have come to within an instant for I saw the tail of the ship settle back. I went over and tried to get in but the doors were jammed and I had to crawl through a hole in the belly. The passengers—"

"Please, gentlemen," said the physician, "this man is on the verge of collapse."

"I want to finish," said Clay doggedly. "The passengers were all crowded up against the bulkhead. I got them out as good as I could but . . . but it wasn't any use. Gasoline was all over everything and I was afraid they'd still be alive and be burned—"

"Gee," chortled a favored reporter. "What a story! Expecting to be blown—"

"Shut up," said Clay, quietly.

"But you're a hero. You—"

"Please," said Clay, looking to-

ward the door. When the man had been put out, Clay continued. "Wayne was jammed in between the collapsed bulkhead and the panel. I worked for about an hour, I suppose, but I couldn't get him free. He . . . he was dead—like the rest of them." He ran a hand across his face as though to wipe out the memory. "I found a road and stopped a car and we brought a party back. I had a man with a big sledge get out the mail. There's nothing worth salvaging about the ship unless it's the metal—but you've got all that from the men you sent after I left. That's all of it, gentlemen."

"The stewardess," prompted the line president.

"She hadn't buckled a belt—or anything," said Clay. "But it didn't matter. The whole fuselage was jammed up like an accordion. I brought her out with the passengers."

"Thank you, Mr. McLean," said the president. "If there is anything at all I can do for you, please don't fail to ask. If you would like to take a plane and get it out of your system, you have only to say the word. I am proud—"

"Just a minute," said a rather harsh voice in the circle. A thickset man behind a thick pair of lenses edged to the front. It was Raymond from the insurance company.

"Yes, Raymond?" said the president.

The adjuster looked for several seconds at Clay. "I am sorry, gentlemen, but I must void the insurance on any plane this man flies."

"Sir," said the president of the line very stiffly, "you are being abrupt and discourteous. I must ask you to explain yourself."

"I meant what I said," stated Raymond. "Today, checking up on your personnel, I learned several things about Mr. McLean—"

"Please leave this for tomorrow," said the physician. "This man is in no shape for additional shocks."

"Let him go on," said Clay.

"Today, as we have been doing for some six months past, I closely examined the record of the men involved in this accident. If I had known this crash would happen, I probably could have stated that Mr. McLean would come out of it without a scratch."

"What's this?" said the president. "If you haven't good proof, Raymond, I think we can dispense with your coverage altogether."

"There'd be no reason. Every other company in the business will have collected the facts, even though we cannot release them. Today I found out that there have been at least three deaths in the vicinity of Mr. McLean in the past two months."

"What," said the president, "has that got to do with it?"

"These are all line officials here?" said Raymond, looking around at the five men.

"Yes," said the president.

"Then I am not blacklisting Mr. McLean, which I have no right to do, though in the future I must cancel all insurance on any plane he is near."

"Mr. Raymond," said Clay, "for I suppose that to be your name, I wonder if you will be good enough to give me further details."

"O. K.," said Raymond. "But you're asking for it. The first death of which I have any trace is that of a music teacher. Your name was coupled with his at the time of his accident for he had a thousand dollars' worth of insurance and we got the record from the police. You

were beside him when he was struck. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Clay.

"After that you were involved in a holdup or some such thing and the tabloids had a story on it. I looked it up. You caught a gangster or some such gentleman but, in the meanwhile, the owner of the store died of heart failure. Is that right?"

"I certainly fail to see," said the president, "how this can have any possible effect upon Mr. McLean's position in our company. If a man chose to die of heart failure—"

"You have not heard me make any accusations against Mr. McLean. In both these cases he was blameless, for the first accident was occasioned by a car crashing a light, and the second when Mr. McLean was saving the life of the store owner. In both cases his actions were admirable."

"And the third," said the president, stiffly hostile.

"The third occurred when the doctor who gave Clay McLean back his health died from the effects of the same machine while he was operating it."

"What's this?" cried Clay, darting up. "Evanston—"

"Dead," said Raymond. "I thought you had heard."

"For the love of Mike," cried the physician, "can't this wait? This man is in no condition—"

"Go on," said Clay, wearily. "There have been three other cases within these same two months."

"You see?" said Raymond in triumph. "I was right."

"What does it prove?" snapped the president. "If in each case McLean was blameless, even commendable in his behavior, I fail to see—"

"Last night," said the remorseless Raymond, "Clay McLean went down in a *DN-160*. Ten passengers, the pilot and the stewardess, twelve human beings in all, met their death. And McLean came out of it alive. Alive, gentlemen, and unhurt."

"But he could not possibly have had any effect upon that crash!" cried the physician, beside himself. "By all evidence and testimony, he is blameless. Why must you torture him?"

"Nineteen people in all," said Clay. "Nineteen." His voice was dead. "And maybe others like the waves from a rock thrown into a pool—"

"This is nonsense," said the president, but without conviction. "Why should you, Raymond, interest yourself—"

"Because it is my business," said Raymond. "I must protect my company in all conceivable ways. McLean is what we call an 'accident prone.' Things happen all around him but never touch him. We have whole files full of cases which center around such accident prones. One man in a large industrial firm caused five deaths, one after the other, and no slightest blame could be attributed to him for any of them. In these cases the accident prone's responsibility is nil, cannot be traced in any way whatever. McLean, if he had disobeyed an order or made a mistake, thereby causing this crash, would have been culpable. He is not. No blame attaches to him other than that he is an accident prone. His mere presence is enough to cause death and destruction. All around him men die. They may not even know the accident prone, and the accident prone may not have touched anything and yet, about such people, death strikes."

"THIS is gibberish!" wailed the president. "This man has acted heroically. He is a former captain

in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He is an ace—" he faltered.

"That he is an ace and has shot down planes in combat has no bearing," said Raymond. "That is directly caused by McLean's own action. Before two months ago, so far as my record goes, he was *not* an accident prone. And then, suddenly, people began to die around him."

"What are you saying?" said the physician. "You, top adjuster for a great insurance company, a man who should know everything there is to know about accidents! And yet you say that men can cause them by their mere presence, without touching anything or having any other guilt—"

"That," said Raymond, "is what I am saying. I cannot give you any reason why. None are known. We know that such a state of affairs not only exists but is general. All over the world there are such people, in villages and cities, in the fields and in the factories. Hundreds of thousands of them who go through life unsuspected by their fellow men and yet, about whom accidents steadily occur. Hundreds of thousands of people, everywhere! Causing, in some instances, only sickness and minor injury, and causing in others violent death and untold agony. Men and women who bear no common identification all serve the same end—to bring destruction into this world."

"What proof have you?" said the president.

"Proof?" said Raymond. "Proof? Is it not enough that when an insurance company, by a close examination of cases, finally identifies and isolates the accident prone and, despite his seeming lack of connection with a string of accidents, we remove him from a certain locality, the accidents cease! Remove the accident prone and you remove the accidents. It is being worked out all over this country."

"You have records?" said the president.

"Files of them. In some firms we have cut our accident rate to nothing by banishing accident prones. We have had to fight down objection against removing seemingly 'innocent' men, but when the accident curve fell sharply off the instant such people were removed, we have been thanked. And this man is only one of the thousands of such servants of disaster."*

The president looked at Clay. "What is the meaning? How can it be that you, a competent—"

"Please," said Clay. "I know that what he says is true. I did not know the name for it. I had misread it. I . . . I thought that some great force was attempting to kill me and that I . . . that I, in my conceit, could keep off death. I did not know—for a long time it stopped. And then Evanston . . . Evanston who had everything to live for. Those passengers—"

The others had drawn back from him without knowing they had done so. Suddenly Clay got a grip on

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* Author's note: The reader is referred to any insurance company for further information concerning the "accident prone." While such firms cannot release actual names and thus blacklist men, they can confirm the facts contained here and even enlarge upon the size of the accident prone legion which is everywhere about us. Attention is further drawn to the maritime "superstition" about "Jonahs." One such man has survived, unscathed, every major naval disaster in the past twenty years. He is frankly called Jonah as a nickname and will not now be allowed aboard any ship. Note, too, that certain crews repeatedly lose their ships to U-boats. Also note that no captain that has lost his vessel to the sea is ever given another vessel. Long practice has shown maritime circles the existence of the accident prone without insurance figures to point out such a thing. Man has many guards against these people in the form of superstition. Not until recently was it completely proved, beyond all shadow of doubt, that the elimination of certain men from industrial plants met with a decrease if not a cessation of accidents in that plant.—L. Ron Hubbard.

himself. He pushed himself up from the chair.

"I had better leave," he said. "The ceiling may fall or the building burn —" he faced Raymond. "The accident prone bears a charmed life, you say?"

"As far as we can discover."

"Worse luck," said Clay. He went to the door and picked up his cap. He started to put it on his head and then remembered himself. From its stained front he unpinned the wings. From his cuffs he unsnapped the braid. He slipped off his pocket insignia and placed the whole upon the reception desk. A little pale, he looked at the silent faces which were turned strainedly to him. Not even the physician had anything to say now.

"Thanks—Raymond."

"I didn't mean," began Raymond, "to—"

"I meant that," said Clay, "in all sincerity. Good night, gentlemen."

He closed the door behind him.

XIII.

LAURA MCLEAN laid the magazine aside and sat very still, listening. But the footsteps in the street passed on without stopping. She gradually eased back into her chair and once more scanned the printed page before her. For five hours she had been on this same page and yet she knew no slightest word of it.

In the hall the grandfather clock ticked monotonously and every time she thought about it a crazy nursery rhyme lilted through her mind. "*Tick-tock, tick-tock,* the mouse ran up the clock—*tick-tock, tick-tock*—"

"Miss Laura," said the little Irish maid, half a face in the crack of the door, "aren't you going to eat?"

"No . . . no, thanks. Not now. When he comes—"

"But, Miss Laura, it's past midnight and you haven't had a thing since—he was reported missing."

"He'll be home shortly," said Laura. "They're probably keeping him at the office for the report or something. You go on to bed."

The little Irish maid withdrew reluctantly, but no footsteps told of her going away. Finally, with pugnacity, she swept into the room bearing a tray which she put on the taboret beside Laura. There was hot coffee and cookies. The girl stood looking at her mistress. She wanted badly to say something consoling but her tongue had left her. Abruptly she rushed from the room and Laura could hear her sobbing as she went upstairs.

"*Tick-tock, tick-tock,* the mouse ran up the clock—"

Suddenly Laura cast the magazine from her and reached for the phone. Several times she had started to call and each time told herself how foolish it was to worry now, when Clay was reported safe—

She dialed the number and heard the connection click into line. The phone at the office rang and then rang again. It continued to ring. Laura hung up. She stood up and began to pace around the room, touching things here and there until she came to the album. She took it to the table and under the light began to turn its pages.

The office was closed, had probably been closed for hours and he had not come home. Was he hurt and wouldn't let them tell her? But no, the evening paper had glowingly described how he had floundered miles through the snow to bring a rescue party back, how he had loaded

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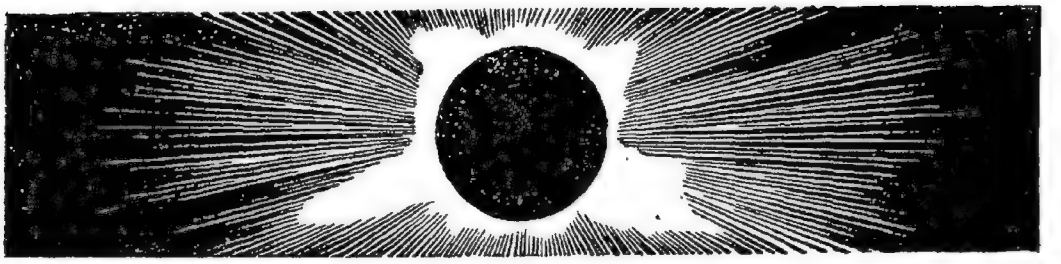


Lurani

by PAUL DENNIS LAVOND

She is not as mortal women, strange Lurani of the Sea,
As the desert she is alien; as the night wind she is free;
And her flesh is lightly tinted with the sheen of waters still,
With the green of placid waters, and her touch is damp and chill.

As the lily of the swamplands, as the stately lily lolling,
She is tall and finely fashioned, and her dark hair, gently falling,
Is alive: it creeps and quivers over shoulder, thigh, and breast—
Slowly creeps and curls, caressing the soft contours of her breast.

In the eyes of my Lurani, in her deep eyes, gently gleaming,
I can see strange thoughts, exotic, and desires that set me dreaming
Of the mighty Sea triumphant, as she strokes me with her hand,
As she languorously strokes me with her curious webbed hand.

I have lain beside Lurani in her pythonlike embrace
Through the nights that were immortal, and the evil in her face
Evermore shall keep me ardent, while her dark eyes o'er me gloat,
Till the night I feel her tresses tighten round my throat.

CALL OF DUTY

by LAURENCE BOUR, Jr.

A purely professional sailor answers the call of his profession—though a lapse of memory may hinder understanding—

Illustrated by R. Isip

It was all very strange. Karl Renner, lieutenant commander aboard the *U-169*, a cruising type submersible of the Imperial German Navy, had to shake his head violently, as he staggered upright and looked about him in the dim light of the machinery and humanity-crowded control room.

One minute the U-boat had been cruising quietly, submerged in the steamer lanes off the northern Scottish coast, the next— Well, what had happened, Renner asked himself dazedly? There seemed to be a curious fog over his mind which interfered with his memory. He was sure something had happened. He seemed to remember a savage blow on the head, as he stumbled and fell against something, then a moment of complete darkness—a moment which had lasted a very long time.

He must have been mistaken, though, for there was no pain anywhere in his square, blond head. And from the attitude of the seamen and his lieutenant, Kleis, imperturbably bending over the eyepiece of the periscope tube, he judged that nothing had happened—nothing had changed during that seemingly eternal moment which had so bemused his mind.

Yet, there was something wrong and he looked carefully about for several moments before his hazy brain could place it. Of course! It was the light! The electric bulbs overhead were glowing with a tenuous, ghostly light—a light which seemed to interpose a curious mist between himself and the others—so that the stolid familiar backs of the men at the controls wavered and were indistinct before his eyes.

He cursed softly, puzzledly, and closed his eyes firmly for a minute, then opened them and looked about hopefully. But it was no better, that obscuring mist still hovered before them. The uneasy thought passed through his mind that his sight had become affected by the strain of long periods of peering through the periscope. Perhaps he was going blind, and that would account for the odd moment of darkness he seemed to remember.

He stood up stiffly and was about to call out to the silent Kleis to ask him anxiously whether he noticed the mist, too. He clamped his jaws shut without speaking, however, as he remembered how strict the physical standards for U-boat service were and he determined to keep his odd disability to himself for the present. Perhaps it would clear up in time and he had no wish to be transfered to the lower pay and dullness of a berth with the High Fleet, stagnating at anchor in the harbor at Kiel.

There was something bothering him, some sense of urgent duty which he could not identify. He felt a sudden impulse to note the time but glancing at his wrist watch he found that it had stopped. This, too, was curious, for he was careful about such small details. With that unknown urge still tugging at his mind, he looked up at the ship's chronometer and noticed that it was 11:00 a. m. Greenwich time. This added to his subtle distress for he was sure that that had not been the time before that curious hiatus in his mind.

Then Renner remembered where he had felt that strong impulse to action before. He remembered a sunny August day in 1914, with flags gayly flying, the rolling thunder of the guns of the High Fleet firing salutes, pretty girls cheering naval reservists reporting to their ships upon the declaration of war, while quietly, without fanfare, the tiny despised U-boats slipped from the Kiel

base to begin their deadly harassing of the commerce of their nation's enemies.

That day, standing beside the helmsman in the little conning tower of his first command, he had felt that same impulse—a fierce urge to strike a blow for the Fatherland and a desire to show the skeptical admirals just how useful submarines could be.

Well, the latter portion of his wish had been satisfied and with time, the sinking of the enemy's sea borne commerce had become a routine rather than a matter of patriotic duty. But now, suddenly, that same old urge had returned and he felt the nervous anxiety to do something, anything.

Then, equally suddenly, the intensity of the desire died away and became nothing but an insistent gnawing at the back of his mind—a gnawing which was easily, if temporarily, smothered by the strange weariness which abruptly possessed him.

Head hanging tiredly, he stumbled down the control room toward the officers' quarters aft. As he passed, Kleis turned slowly an inquiring face toward him, a face which, because of the odd mist obscuring his vision, was nothing but a featureless blob of whiteness in the ghostly light.

Renner nodded silently toward him and the other wagged his square head solemnly in reply. Kleis and he were used to each other; there was hardly any need to speak between them when a brief gesture would carry understanding. Kleis understood his meaning and would stand the watch unaided, while Renner caught some much-needed rest.

The commander found the compartments and men he passed strange, somehow, with a subtle difference which evaded his understanding. Almost, he would have sworn, it was not the same boat—or, if the same, not real at all. Passing through the crew's quarters, he actually stopped and examined a glistening torpedo slung under the bunks. Only the touch of the cold metal and the rounded deadliness of the red-tipped warhead convinced him that it was really there.

He flung a glance back over his shoulder as he reached the tiny, closed-off cubicle of the commander's quarters. He was not sure, but it sent an odd thrill of dread through him, as he seemed to see far forward that the watertight doors of the low torpedo room were tightly dogged shut. It was too far away and his obscured vision was not reliable, so he decided, hazily, that he must have seen wrong. Besides, a cut-off compartment would mean that it had been flooded, and that was impossible. Nothing could have happened to the ship and, if it had and the torpedo room was flooded, the U-boat could not have been cruising submerged; it would have been either at the bottom or on the surface of the ocean.

As he flung himself, fully dressed, upon his tiny bunk and a wave of darkness swept luxuriously over him, a half-formed memory bobbed at the back of his brain, warning him that something had happened and that something was very wrong.

It was a long time later that Renner awoke reluctantly from a sleep seemingly as deep as that of the grave and blinked stupidly about him. It was that ever present sense of urgency which had awakened him and he had a vague idea it had aroused him from even deeper slumbers earlier. He puzzled irritably over it but, though he felt physically rested, his vision had not cleared and

his brain seemed as curiously bemused as ever.

His whole body felt stiff and cold, as he climbed out of his crumpled uniform and changed it for another. He made a few brief attempts to make himself presentable, then stalked from his tiny cabin toward the bow and the control room.

Strangely enough, no thought of food entered his mind, though he knew it was long since he had eaten. His only desire was to get forward and clear up, if he could, the odd points annoying his hazy mind. As he stumbled up the narrow, crowded length of the submarine, he glanced about him. Not many men were up and about—most seamen were reclinging like inanimate logs upon their bunks.

Noticing this and that the droning hum of the motors had died and were replaced by the noisy chugging of the Diesels, he knew that it must be night and that the U-boat had come to the surface for the charging of batteries and changing of air. The sub was rolling slightly, as if at rest, and the soft slapping of waves against the outer hull echoed down the open hatchways.

Renner felt cheered by the influx of strong, fresh air. The atmosphere in the U-boat was musty at best, filled with odors of oil, machinery, and crowded humanity, but, just now, it seemed even worse. There were other new odors, subtly unpleasant, which he could not identify, but which he disliked.

As he passed through the various compartments, the interior of the *U-169* seemed again oddly different and the men in them, also. In spite of the mist obscuring his vision, he could recognize them in the ghostly light, as they bent over their tasks and moved stiffly about, ignoring him as if he were not there. He shuddered involuntarily and avoided looking at them too closely.

He saw the grimy figure of the chief engineer, Stuggart, apparently absorbed in the packing of a pump; passing the shut-off cubicle of the wireless room, he glimpsed the thin little Bavarian, Krause, who presided there, almost engulfed by the masses of wiring, frosty tubes, and power-packs. Others, he saw and recognized with a curious effort of memory, as if he had not seen them for a long time, but no face did he see clearly through the mist and he felt oddly disinclined to speak or be spoken to by them.

By now, he had reached the control room amidships and he looked vacantly about him. It was nearly deserted except for a couple of seamen standing by the induction valves and ballast tank controls. Stolidly they stood facing their rows of glass-faced dials and gauges, as they waited for any emergency orders from the officer of the watch. Renner cursed helplessly, as he stared at them and saw their dungaree-clad forms wavering and dissolving mistily in the vision of his distorted eyesight.

Noting that the conning tower hatch was open, he approached the ladder and stiffly clambered up the steep but short length. In another moment he popped through the hatch to find himself on the little inclosed bridge alongside a taciturn seamen, acting as look-out, and the figure of Lieutenant Kleis, who was engaged in shooting the Pole Star with a sextant.

The latter nodded his head slowly to him, as he muttered inaudibly the reading on the vernier gauge, and jotted the figures in a notebook on the tiny chart table before him. Renner inclined his head in acknowledgment and, feeling oddly unde-

sirous of conversation, turned and swept the horizon with his eyes.

In the open air, Renner's vision seemed vastly improved. He saw about him the vastness of the open sea, dark calm waters stretching out all around the little craft to join the lighter darkness of the evening sky. Dusk was rapidly deepening into night. Above a black, moonless sky was studded with icy stars and, looking up, the U-boat commander felt a sudden longing for the sunny brightness of day. He had a fleeting impression that, for him, this darkness had already continued a very long time.

Then a curious fact struck him and he blinked puzzledly about him, as he wondered what day—what season it was. The *U-169* had left Kiel late in January of 1917; it should then have been early February. Yet the air, though cool, was not like that of winter and no ice-garlands festooned the netting cables slanting down from the conning tower. Was it another puzzle or just a freak of the weather occasioned by the Gulf Stream?

He sighed and gave it up; it was all too much for his bemused brain. But, seeking something to distract his mind, he turned to the chart table and began checking the calculations of the navigator. Again he found sore bewilderment for his pains. The hour angles and declinations of the heavenly bodies given in the nautical almanac by no means corresponded with the observations taken.

He knew well enough that it was February 3, 1917, and that their position, by dead-reckoning, was about two hundred miles off the western coast of Scotland, but something was wrong. Going by the figures in the tables, their position was altogether different, by some hundreds of miles; either that, or the date was way off. He couldn't make up his mind which.

Just then, the look-out uttered a short, guttural bark and Renner whirled instantly to follow the seaman's outstretched arm pointing toward something upon the dark waters. He had no difficulty in picking up the indicated object, as he unslung his night glasses and adjusted them to his eyes rapidly.

For, bravely ablaze with lights, from stem to stern, a large vessel was plowing swiftly through the waves, not a mile away. Rows of uncovered port-hole lights twinkled mysteriously through the gathering gloom. Colored sailing lights blinked along the hull and powerful floodlights glared whitely upon huge, emblazoned American flags painted upon the hull amidships.

Watching her closely and noting angrily that she did not even bother to steer a zigzag course, as she steamed through the submarine zone, Renner swore heartily. Damned Yankees, he thought contemptuously, insisting upon their right to profit from the deaths of good Germans by selling munitions and contraband to the Britishers while they allowed, without a protest, the latter to starve German women and children with an illegal blockade.

As he watched the American merchantman steam brazenly by, he fairly itched to send a deadly torpedo to blast the ship and its cargo of munitions into eternity. If only he dared to disobey the admiralty orders—

But it was not until the ship was well by on its way toward a British port, that his brain functioned to conjure up a belated memory and he cursed his forgetfulness. Had not the sealed orders he had opened, when safely at sea, instructed him

that unrestricted submarine warfare was to commence as of February 1st? It was his duty to sink that merchantman!

He wheeled abruptly and opened his mouth to bellow swift commands, then a last glance at the vanishing lights of the ship made him close it hopelessly, again. She was apparently a fast vessel and with his slow craft he could never hope to overtake her in a stern chase. He blamed his stupid, even incredible, forgetfulness for allowing her to get away. Well, never mind, he told himself; the steamer lanes were filled with easy prey and all he had to do was wait.

The silent Kleis finished his calculations and, with a last nod, vanished below. Renner folded away the chart table, switched off the tiny, carefully-shaded light, and looked about him again.

Below him, he could see the slender black hull of the U-boat extending far forward to the tapering bow. A little forward of the conning tower on the small deck was the irregularly shaped hump of the tarpaulin-covered five-inch gun.

His eyes roved lidly over it, then suddenly narrowed, and he peered down at the gun keenly. It was very dark but there was something wrong, he was sure. The gun and its cover seemed to be bedecked with damply dripping masses of seaweed and other ocean vegetation. And, looking beyond it, instead of the sleek blackness of the rounded hull, glistening wetly in the starlight, he seemed to see rusty plating completely and heavily incrusted with similar masses of seaweed and even barnacles.

It was very strange. He wondered uneasily, where it all could have come from and how it had collected so quickly. The last time they were on the surface, there had been no such incrustations. Perhaps, he thought, the submarine had plowed through some dense patch of floating vegetation but even so—

He was given no more time to ponder over this additional puzzle, for once again the look-out barked a guttural warning. His night glasses leaped to his eyes and he turned to peer through the gloom, following the direction of the pointing arm.

For long moments he stared into the darkness in vain, but at last, his straining eyes picked out of the darkness a moving mass of deeper shadow, quietly slipping through the night. She was evidently a fair-sized craft, a few points off the port bow, and already so close that he would have to act swiftly to intercept her, as she steamed rapidly by, outward bound, on the Halifax run.

He swore happily, as he dove down the conning tower hatch and into the control room. Even as his feet met the floor plating, and he heard the metal clang of the hatch being shut and dogged tight by the lookout following after him hastily, his mouth was opened and he bellowed a series of swift commands.

The alarm buzzers sounded raucously all over the ship, streams of half-dressed seamen poured from the crew's quarters to race through the ghostly glow to take up their posts. The other hatches clanged quickly shut and, in response to his shouted order, the chugging of the Diesels died instantly and were replaced by the mounting throbbing drone of the electric motors.

The U-boat trembled all over its slim length, then suddenly shot ahead, as the thrashing screws took hold. There came the dull rumbling of tons of sea water pouring into the tanks, as silent men spun wheels and

jerked levers frantically in the crowded control room.

With the vanes set at a sharp angle, the deadly craft rapidly submerged. The ocean swiftly closed over the glistening hull, mounted up the rounded conning tower, and in a few moments engulfed all but the slender black stick of the periscope.

Remembering hazily, that there seemed to be something wrong with the bow torpedo room, Renner had the U-boat come around in a wide, sweeping circle under water, until the stern tubes bore some distance ahead of the bow of the steamer not one thousand meters away. She then hove to, waiting grimly in ambush for her unsuspecting prey.

TENSE SILENCE ensued, as Renner peered keenly through the periscope, judging with practiced eye course, speed, and range of enemy, and directing minor adjustments in the laying of the submarine to correspond. Perhaps his absorption in this task kept him from observing the other smaller blot of darkness nearly hidden behind the hull of the larger steamer.

He removed his eyes from the periscope and gave one hasty glance about the ship's interior. He noted swiftly, the concentrated attention of the men at the controls. He cursed as he found that same mist hovering before his eyes which made the familiar figures of his crew shimmer and dance eerily in the ghostly semigloom.

That sense of urgency, which had been bothering him all day, now swelled until it occupied his entire mind. He became nervously anxious for action, as if the blow must be struck before it was too late. A glance at the chronometer indicated about 7:45 p. m., Greenwich time. Less than nine hours had elapsed. At eleven o'clock he had seemed to come out of a momentary coma to find his craft and crew so strangely changed and so many odd things to puzzle him.

Then a bell sounded warningly and, as Kleis stepped stiffly to the intraship phone, Renner turned his attention again to the periscope, glad to distract his sorely bewildered mind. Only a few seconds had elapsed since he had last looked but already the sharp bow of the steamer was about to cut across under the U-boat's stern.

As from a great distance, he heard Kleis' somber tones, "Stern tubes all ready, sir."

Renner nodded silently, then stiffened, as he saw the dark bulk of his prey move slowly, very slowly, into the field of the etched lines. Slowly, too, he counted to himself, then suddenly barked, after watching the steamer inch into position right across his sights: "No. 1 tube—fire!"

Kleis instantly echoed the order into the phone. As it reechoed far away in the stern, there came the hissing of highly compressed air and the ship trembled slightly, as the slim and deadly black torpedo leap away in an angry froth of bubbling foam under the surface of the sea.

Swiftly an arrowlike trace of white foam extended itself straight across the calm dark sea, heading at forty knots, right at the hull of the doomed vessel. Watching anxiously, as the few seconds dragged interminably by, Renner noted for recording in the log that the ship was a passenger vessel of about fifteen thousand tons.

He wished he could get some idea of her identity. He was conscious of relief, though he approved of the sealed orders, that, being outward bound, and it being well into the

third year of the war, she almost certainly would not be carrying a large passenger list. He did not like to kill noncombatants, if it could be avoided.

Then the streaking torpedo vanished into the darkness under the ship's hull. The lookouts aboard the doomed steamer tardily spied the deadly missile and with unseen officers bellowing futilely and her engine room telegraph jangling frantically, the unknown vessel attempted to veer sharply to port and evade her doom.

But too late! A huge towering column of white water and splintered metal spouted into the air at a point just aft her bridge along the hull. Belatedly came the booming concussion, sounding like a ponderous wooden door slamming shut, and the entire vessel seemed to stop in her tracks and reel crazily to starboard.

RENNER SIGHED, half-pleased, half-sorry, torn between satisfaction at a duty well done and the distaste for sinking a proud ship. As he continued to sweep the narrow horizon of the starry night through his periscope in careful search for any intruding warship before venturing to surface his craft, he was wondering, puzzledly, what ship she could be.

Her lines, indistinct as they were through the darkness, baffled him with their subtle strangeness. The stubby funnels, the clean, fast lines of hull and superstructure, were unlike any he had ever seen. So might a ship of the not-too-distant future look, thought he. Almost, he would have sworn, there was no such ship listed in Lloyd's Registry of that period.

Then he shrugged and forgot about it. He muttered a command to the waiting Kleis and heard the curiously weak bellow, as Kleis repeated and amplified it to the crew. Seamen sprang stiffly to obey and, staring through his 'scope, Renner saw the black waters lapping below the upper lens receding swiftly.

Quickly the rusty barnacled hull emerged from the waves. With the decking just awash, the *U-169* edged cautiously nearer her victim as sea water cascaded from the tarpaulin cover of the deck gun and spilled from the glistening black conning tower. Renner took one last glance through the 'scope and turned away.

He found Kleis, his face vague whiteness shining in the ghostly light, facing him. From far off he seemed to hear the other's voice urging: "Wireless— Call patrol— Hadn't we better—"

Renner shook his head in a vain effort to clear it, then realized the meaning of the other's words. Of course. They were not far from shore and the British patrols were numerous in the region. A wireless from the sinking ship might bring one or more of the deadly wasplike destroyers bustling over the horizon to bear down on them before they could dive to safety.

Instantly he was the efficient Prussian officer again, as he sprang toward the conning tower ladder and bellowed: "Gun crew on deck and clear for action! On the double now!"

Somewhere was the whispering echo of a petty officer repeating the command, as Renner pushed open the hatch above him and emerged on the conning tower. As Kleis followed him, he heard the sonorous clangor of the hatch on the tiny deck below flying open and a stream of dungaree-clad seamen—vague, dark shapes in the misty gloom—boiled out and about the gun.

They quickly and silently jerked

away the gun cover, knocked loose the muzzle tampion, and swung the gleaming grease-covered barrel about to bear on the target. Renner looked at the doomed ship bulking larger through the darkness, as the U-boat slipped quietly nearer.

Her hull was no longer darkened but ablaze with a myriad of bright lights, madly glowing. Distress rockets, ghastly white against the night, soared in fiery arcs from her decks. In the shifting illumination, Renner saw that the vessel was sinking by the bow with an additional heavy list to port.

Only a few hundred meters away and coming nearer, he could hear the frightened shrieking of women and children—many of them—mounting above the hoarse but calm bellowing of her officers. Renner cursed in dismay, as he realized that, contrary to his expectations, she was carrying a large list of passengers—harmless folk whom he had no wish to hurt.

Her horn was booming in solemn, steady blasts. Kleis cast loose the fastenings of a large searchlight and swung the glaring white beam about to play over the stricken ship.

As THE U-boat nudged closer, the beam passed over her rounded stern and hung momentarily upon the golden script of the ship's name lettered there. Renner, catching the name, blinked and thought fast. The light swung farther and lifted to bathe the superstructure in its silvery radiance.

That name was familiar, he seemed to remember another ship of that name being sunk earlier in the war. He knew it was not this one; her lines were entirely different. He shook his head in sore bewilderment. Then, remembering the British habit of naming liners with somewhat similar names, he decided that this must be such a case. Perhaps it was the *Lusitania* he was thinking of, the two names were somewhat alike.

In those crowded seconds the five-inch deck gun had come to rest, bearing on the spot the searchlight picked out. Sharply outlined against the blackness of the sky—thin fragile pole and mass of dangling wires—was the ship's wireless mast.

As the breech swung open, the starlight glinted on a long brass cartridge, and the breechblock clanged shut again, Renner heard faintly, the gunner barking swiftly the range, elevation, and type of shell.

In the last moment of tense silence, he saw crowded boats, filled with half-dressed women and children and a few male passengers, swinging out on their davits from the ship's side and dropping slowly toward the lapping waves. He heard the shrieks and groans, as one large lifeboat ran too swiftly through the davits and plummeted heavily into the sea, breaking its back and spilling its screaming human cargo.

Then he whirled quickly about and, leaning over the rail, bellowed to the men down below, huddled about the dark shape of the gun on the tiny deck: "Fire!"

The detonation split the night and the solemn silence of the sea; red flame and hot shell spat from the muzzle to stab the darkness. As the dense clouds of powder gases swirled sluggishly upward about the conning tower, Renner felt the submarine reel heavily to starboard beneath him. Simultaneously, there sounded the startled cries of the gun crew and they were accompanied by the intense savage screeching of metal plates, buckling and crumpling.

He spun instantly about from watching the reddish blossoming of

flame, as the shell burst harmlessly short of the wireless mast. He was shocked into speechlessness by the sight of a huge, ragged-edged and gaping aperture in the deck where the gun should have been!

The impact of the recoil had ripped open the strangely weakened plating of the rusty hull with its thick incrustation of weeds. The massive gun and its mount had sunk through the buckled plates.

Even as he looked incredulously, there came a resounding crash. The mighty pile of metal had smashed into the interior of the U-boat. Right into the battery room it went, dug through the floor plating there and on into the bottom of the hull beyond.

The shock of its impact sent the whole craft shivering mightily and Renner pitched helplessly from his feet and sprawled half in and half out of the open hatch. As he lay there dazedly, every wrenching of the hull of his beloved but stricken craft tugging at his heart painfully, his bemused memory began slowly but sure, to function for the first time that day.

Below Renner tons of icy, black sea water were rushing into the battery room and the lights were sputtering and threatening to go out. Grimly silent seamen struggled in dirty, oil-flecked water to close and dog-tight the door between battery room and control room. The ballast tanks were blown. The doors were pressed shut against the fierce resistance of the incoming water, cutting off those of the crew trapped in the battery room. It all resolved into a struggle between the inrushing water and the ejecting ballast to keep her afloat.

But her commander knew nothing of this. Lying limply huddled on the conning tower, he was wholly engrossed by the series of vivid recollections shooting through his mind. He only knew that all this was familiar, horribly familiar. Something like this had happened before.

Flashes of long past scenes passed swiftly before him—his first victim, an oil tanker searing the winter night with a fiery blaze of oil-fed flame, as she sank off the Dover cliffs—that running battle with an armed merchantman—that day at Wilhelmshaven when the Kaiser, in person, had pinned the *Pour le Merite* upon his proudly heaving breast—that—

And then he remembered and remembering knew all; why the bow torpedo room had been shut off, why he seemed to recollect a violent blow on his head, why everything was so odd!

He felt the *U-169*, as she lost the futile battle with the inrushing sea, began to settle beneath him. Below him the ship lurched and rolled sluggishly, the water, lapping higher about the hull, began with ever-increasing volume to pour through the hole in the deck plating. The lights blinked feebly, winked definitely, and finally out, and utter blackness engulfed the doomed, strangely silent crew.

He remembered the cautious slipping into the midst of a large convoy off the Irish coast, the thrill, as the deadly torpedo dug into the hull of a large liner, the hasty, fearful dive as speedy destroyers had shot by overhead, popping huge ashcans of high explosive from their Y-guns into the roiled waves.

He remembered the awful savage thunder of the exploding depth-charges blasting the ocean depths all about them, the terrible moments as the lights sputtered, preparatory to

going out, how the men had crouched helplessly at their stations awaiting the inevitable doom.

Then had come the last world-shaking concussion just by the port bow. As tons of sea water poured into the bow torpedo room, they had struggled to close the watertight doors and he had ordered hoarsely, the ballast tanks to be blown.

But it had been too late; for one brief moment the *U-169* had bobbed to the surface of the boiling waters, there to be met by a furious flurry of fire from the destroyers' guns. Before the weight of incoming water had become too great, the *U-169* had rolled over, exposing the glistening wet plating of her keel, and then had plummeted to the bottom like a stone.

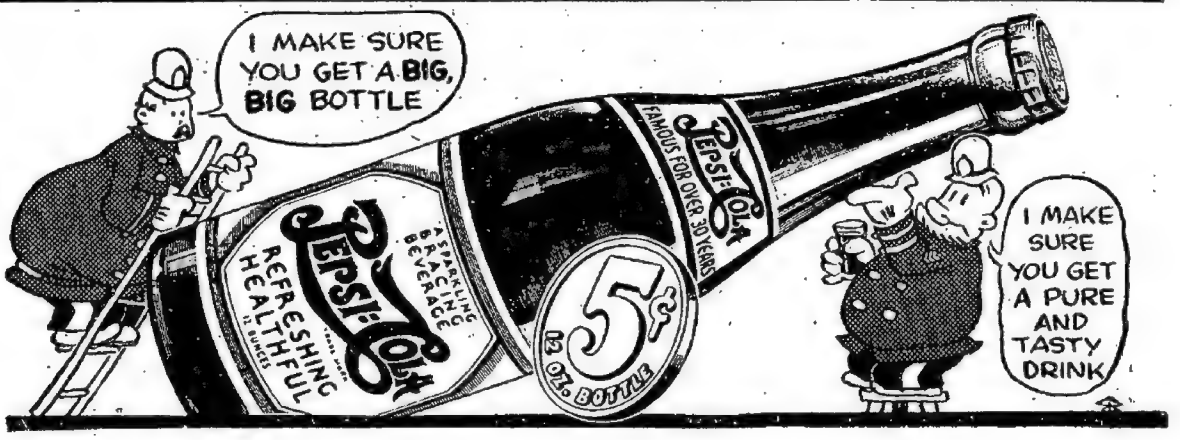
That was his last recollection for, with the sub's turning turtle, his head had smashed violently against the metal base of the periscope to which he had been clinging. Lying now wedged in the open hatch, he wondered idly, how they had escaped after that with their lives. But had they—

Then the rusty resurrected hull of the *U-169* plunged suddenly by the bow beneath the waves, without a cry or moan from any of her doomed crew. Lieutenant Commander Renner's last thoughts, as the waters closed swiftly over his helpless body, were that after all, dead men should not fear dying again for their country

Some moments later, into the particular portion of the sea, which by the huge air bubbles still bursting on the surface and the slowly spreading slick of oil marked the spot where the *U-169* had gone down, a heavily, overcrowded lifeboat from the sinking steamer rowed ponderously.

A half-dressed man, huddling in the stern sheets, glared at the oil-flecked waves and barked, "Looks like she's gone, thank God! Damned bloody Huns, murdering innocent people. The war only began at eleven this morning, and already they're sinking without warning. What in hell do they think this is—the World War?"

Another disheveled passenger beside him muttered fervent agreement, as he tossed off the remains of a bottle, which was being passed around, for the September night was chilly. Then with a curse, he tossed the empty bottle at a bursting bubble of air and oil, and remarked bitterly, "And the hell of it is, if I know my Germans, they'll claim they know nothing about it. Well, let 'em try and say they didn't sink the *Athenia!* We'll know better."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THE WISDOM OF AN ASS

By SHAKI ALI HASSAN

THE WISDOM OF AN ASS

by SILAKI ALI HASSAN

The second in a series of modern Arabian legends, current today in the Yafri hill-country.

Illustrated by Finlay

Brahim Ben Saood, the new Visier of Yafri, strode into the judgment chamber holding high his aba folds so that his gilded hydthar-shoes would show. His first case had come and his face was glowing with the light of self-content.

A solemn crowd had gathered from the avenues to hear the wisdoms that'd pour from Brahim's vaunted skull and they salaamed and squatted on the floor. The Yafrinni sons had seen the seal of Islam on the parchment sent from Mecca. They knew that the Grand Mufti had vested Brahim with full authority and had ordained that all who lived within the crag-bound valley should listen to his wit. And Brahim knew that the Musslem'n around were dancing on his palm—and that he had but to close his fist to turn that dance to torment.

What bade his sneering attitude, none knew. Mayhap his girth had some to do with it. Unlike the Muslim sons about, he was tall and broad and ponderous. His shoulders hulked, his hands and feet were immense—as was his nose. His small eyes were deep and closely set and his beard reigned heavily from cheek-bones clear to throat. If one could see the hairline of his shaven head, he could see that hair grew down until it begged to stroke his shaggy brows.

And Brahim sat himself upon the golden dais and leered the room from end to end as if to note that all were listening with both, their eyes and ears.

At length he spoke—and his voice boomed against the wall and fought its way out to the halls.

"Caliph Hassan is dead," he said and paused—as if all who heard had never known. "I am here to fill his hydthars—to render judgment in this valley court. I am not Caliph, for none but those of Ali's blood might bear the title. But"—and he pressed his emphasis—"I *am* Visier until the Grand Mufti finds a Caliph! Let all who listen bear in mind."

He motioned to an armed ragyil to bring on the disputers. The guard obeyed, ushering two men into the room.

The first wore the aba and turban of a wealthy merchant—simple but expensive. His features were wrinkled, his beard an unsightly white—like the crags surrounding a haven of Rakham, the carrion eagle. His tread was slinking and precise considering his age, and at each step, he threw a leering grin at Brahim.

The Muslim son who followed was a young man of shabby dress, his aba and burnoose flaked with chaff and burs. His beard was ragged and untrimmed, but full and black.

Humbly, they salaamed and sat themselves.

Brahim studied them for a breath

or two and then asked which one was the plaintiff in the case.

The shabbily dressed one arose to his feet.

"I am Abdul Hamid," he offered quietly. "I reap the fields at the farther end of the valley. Seven days ago, the cobbler Kassim el Dalil, to whom I have been taking my work, suggested with all unselfishness that the Yafrinni take some of their work to other hydthar-builders. His popularity had prompted almost all Yafrinni to bring their work to him and he thought that it was not fair at all to those who bothered him in trade.

"Following his suggestion, I entered the shop of cobbler Rahzul and ordered shoes from him. I am not a wealthy man, being but a laborer of the fields, and had needed shoes for some length of time, as might be witnessed by the hydthars which I wear"—and he drew back his aba and displayed his ragged feet—"but when Rahzul took my order, he seemed irritated at each mention of Kassim—no doubt envying Kassim's popularity—and swore *'Billah—they'll wear one whole eternity'* whilst taking the measure of my feet. I paid the fee and left.

"Yesterday morning, when I made ready to go forth into the fields for work, one of Rahzul's helpers met me at the doorway and handed me the new shoes which I had ordered.

"I was delighted with the service and they did not look one whit bad at all. The helper vanished and I went back into my house and donned the shoes immediately. I swear Billah that I wore them for but a dozen steps. I did not tread the avenues with them upon my feet, yet, look"—and he fumbled within his aba folds and drew forth a few shreds of leather and held them in his hands. "There was no seam of thread, there was no fair leather in them. They had been built of rottenness and shone with oil of sesame!

"All of that is well and good, for Rahzul had said, 'Billah—they'll wear one whole eternity!' and I felt that he would build me another pair to take their place. But when I arrived at his marble cobblery, he denied ever having seen me in his life—as did his helpers.

"I am a man of no means. You can see the sweat of toil upon my aba. I have but one wife—I can afford no more. I paid two gold dinnarhs for this"—and he threw the pices to the floor, contemptuously.

. . . .

BRAHIM said nothing, but stroked his beard in thought and then turned his eyes to Rahzul, the defendant.

"Your story," he said—and pulled back his aba that his gold-incrusted hydthars could glint throughout the room. The defendant leered at them and cast a smirking glance at Abdul, the plaintiff.

"I am Rahzul, the cobbler to whom this stranger refers," he sneered. "I can tell nothing of this stupid charge. I have never seen him in the wholeness of my threescore years. Neither have I seen his rotten shoes before—nor measured of his stinking feet! I have built the greatest hydthars in the valley"—and he looked at Brahim's golden shoes again and smiled contentedly. "I have built shoes to fit Hassan's feet when he ruled this crag-bound Yafri—for his father, the Caliph before him, too.

"I have, however, oft repaired shoes made by other hands. If you would care to let me see the pieces, mayhap I can recognize the style of build and name the real thief who built such shoes for yonder brother, Abdul."

"You are a craven liar!" shouted

Abdul, wrathfully. "You built those shoes and swore Billah—"

"Silence!" roared Brahim, and he leaped upright to his feet. "Silence, reaper! Thou art in Yafri's court and in the presence of Brahim!"

Abdul looked fearfully at the jinnilike figure of the hulking judge and bit his tongue lest he blurt curses at the smirking Rahzul.

Brahim turned to the defendant. "I had thought of that, Muslim son," he lied. "I was preparing to suggest it"—and he motioned to an abd, who picked the pieces of the tattered shoes from the floor and handed them to the cobbler.

Rahzul took them, disdain written on his face, and examined every piece.

"Never," he said aloud, "have I ever seen such awful work. A man who'd take his brethren in on such a crooked hoax should be punished as sees fit the wisdom of the court!" Rahzul hesitated and drew a piece of leather nearer to his eye.

"Aha!" he cried. "I have it—I know who built these shoes!" and he arose, feebly, and ran up close to Brahim. "Here—look. The name of Kassim, son of Meth'sullah, sewn within the tip! Kassim, the rotten cobbler who boasts of wisdom—and to this day has tried the Yafrinni disputes without authority."

A look of intense interest crept to Brahim's brow. He leaned forward as if he had not heard aright. "You say," he uttered unbelievingly, "that this Kassim has adjudged upon the seat of court without permit from the Mufti?"

"Yes, I say," sneered Rahzul. "And I daresay, quite again, that he'll be soon judging o'er your head—for Abdul willed to take this case to Kassim rather than to you."

Brahim whitened beneath his beard and when he spoke, the rafters shook and all who listened, cowered. "Bring this Yafri ass to me!" he gritted. "I'll judge his case with thine—and bring him soon! Before the fall of night! Fetch him!"

Rahzul leered again at Abdul and made as if to go.

Abdul frothed a purple rage and wheeled on Brahim. "Kassim has no part in here!" he shrieked. "Rahzul lies within his craven throat! Kassim but lent his wisdom to Yafrinni—and it's been *true* wisdom, too! Before you came, the Mufti had us no Caliph—Yafri'd turned to feuds and disputes. A bare twelve moons ago, treachery and blood flowed on the avenues—and now the Yafri sons are laughing, because Kassim bore them wisdom and settled their affairs as might have any son of Islam in his place. He brought peace back to the valley and all who know him, love him—except yon rotten cobbler, who's chosen to implicate the son of Meth'sullah because Kassim's cobblery provides too strong a competition to his reeking hydthar-building! I stake my life and swear Billah that Rahzul built those shoes—the decrepit swine!"

Brahim trembled from his turban to his feet. His hulking massiveness squared itself and strode to a spot a bare pace from Abdul's defiant beard.

"For thy curdling words, reaper," he intoned viciously, "and for thy blundering insolence and lying epithets, I will bear thee ten added lashes by the stoutest missuwak!"

II.

Kassim el Dalil sat by his father's side in their cobblery on the Avenue of Stones. Idly, he watched the old man fumble for a needle—and when he saw that Meth'sullah

had found it, Kassim plucked it from his fingers and threaded it for him.

"I have heard of braggarts many times within my life—but never like Brahim," half-blind old Meth'sullah said disgustedly. "If his wisdom be as stupid as his talk, Yafri shall soon go back to strife and inward hatred —from whence it came before you dealt it justice."

Kassim did not speak for fully ten long stitches and a knot.

"It isn't right," he said at length, his eyes still on his work. "The man must have *some* sort of wit—for, true, the Mufti wouldn't have sent him here to take charge of the state. Then again, he will not be here for long, for only the blood of Mohammed might rule the Muslim son and Brahim is no Caliph. Then"—he paused once more to pick a silken tassel from the floor—"we have not heard the wisdom of Brahim as yet. There is but to wait to see. Surely he's a commanding personality—powerful and tall like a healthy camel-bull. And outspoken, too."

"Then he should have the task of cultivating fields"—spat Kassim's father, wrathfully—"not vending wisdom. The man's girth has naught to do with it."

Kassim laughed and tweaked the old man's beard. "Give the man an opportunity to show himself, old Meth'sullah—may Allah will thee life until the crags around wear off into the winds!"

There came the *clop-clop* of horses' hoofs without the cobblery. Six scimitar'd feet left stirrup holes and strode toward the shop.

"I hear the sound of scabbards, Kassim," frowned Meth'sullah. "What seek they of our cobblery? We are honest Musslem'n—"

The three ragyagyil entered. One of them motioned to the door.

"Kassim," he ordered, "whichever one you be, Brahim, the son of Allah, wills that you attend the case of Rahzul, thy brother cobbler."

Kassim's brows knit in inquiry. "I am Kassim," he said as he laid his work aside and arose. "Rahzul's in some kind of trouble?" and he looked doubtfully at his father.

Old Meth'sullah cast a worried look at the guard and whispered: "I told you, Kassim. Watch thy tread —I see danger on the avenue. Rahzul's been envious of our hydthar-making—"

THE GATES were open when they had reached the palace wall and the guards dismounted and entered, Kassim in their midst.

Here, within the courtyard, a strange scene reviewed itself. Brahim, the Mecca Judge, sat on a gilded dais. To either side and to his rear were abds and court attendants and, excepting for a clearing in the center, Yafrinni filled the inclosure so tightly that they treaded upon each other's toes.

The bare spot was round and broad—and upon the farther rim, six earthen jars of ten palms height apiece, stood capped and waiting, rigidly.

Kassim salaamed his way into the court and waited Brahim's word.

Brahim did not speak until the mumble of the crowd had drifted off into the air and all was deathly quite. Then he clapped his hands and two ragyagyil ushered forth Rahzul and Abdul—the former bearing the tattered shoes. Abdul looked sadly at Kassim and then down at his hydthar tips.

"Yafrinni," thundered Brahim to the crowd, "I have been chosen by the Grand Mufti of Islam to rule thy valley court. Mohammed arrasul Allah—and I, Mohamed's slave, have unearthed a wretched plot

wherein one of thy brethren was doomed to shame by the treachery of another. By true wisdom and deduction, I have the culprit here. I know that you will see for yourselves that Brahim deals justice—cold and quickly, true—but justice."

Then he ordered Rahzul to tell his side of the argument, briefly and without omission. The cobbler did as he was bid, leering all the while, and ended up with: "Then you discovered, with your heavenly powers of observation, the name of Kassim written on the inner side of the rotten hydthars, where Kassim had sewn it purely by force of bragging habit. He has not been content with taking my trade from me under the guise of giving free advice, but wills to insult my cobblery by palming off such horrid artistry, as mine."

Brahim beamed at the compliment and ordered Abdul to tell his version of the case. Abdul did—omitting nothing. He accounted for the reason why Kassim had sent him to some other cobbler and ended with a string of biting charges as to Rahzul's professional jealousy and spiteful character.

A throb rose from the crowd at these blunt accusations and Brahim strode up to him, menacingly. "Thy Kaffir'd words spit blasphemy, accursed fool!" he rumbled. "Ere this case is ended—if thy point has not been proven—I'll deal thee lashes, twenty harsh, for thy wagging tongue!" He turned to Rahzul and snatched the shoes from his hand and pushed them into Abdul's bloodless face. "The signature of Kassim!" he bellowed. "See it with thine unbelieving eyes—the name of Kassim writ with thread, by his own fingers!"

Brahim wheeled on Kassim, himself: "What say you for yourself, professor of great wisdom? Wouldst leave the verdict to Brahim—or wouldst talk thyself into greater punishment?"

Kassim, who had not spoken a solitary word during the argument, salaamed. "I beg to speak, son of Allah," he said humbly.

"Speak then," spat Brahim, "and see if thy tongue can thwart thy signature!" and he strode back to the dais and seated himself—holding his aba clear the while so his golden hydthars showed.

Kassim saw them—saw Rahzul's contented glance at them and noted of his smile. The hydthars were Yafrinni; none other could have made them—and Rahzul was a cobbler of repute despite his selfishness.

"My old father, Meth'sullah, and I have built near four thousand shoes since I cobbled Yafri," Kassim said evenly. "The Muslim sons about are wearing them. My signature's in none—excepting in this tattered pair. I have nothing but new stock; there is no rotten leather in my storeroom—" and he ceased suddenly as if he had decided that enough had been said.

Brahim waited, not certain that Kassim had finished.

"You don't deny the charges, then," he smiled. "Enough for thy case. I will pass judgment in a trice—but first, I hear that thou art wise," and he grinned in open sarcasm. "Without permit from the Mufti, you have judged at Yafri's tribunal. If thy wisdom is equal to thy bragging, then good has come of it. But from the lack of point in your defensive speech, I take it that thou art as stupid as a burdened ass. What say you to that?"

KASSIM had never thought of himself as being wise. Others had—and he had known. Brahim's motive now showed itself in its true colors for the first time; Kassim had been

inveigled in a treacherous array of circumstances for no other reason than that Brahim might have the pleasure of bowing him in humility.

"Sometimes," Kassim replied wearily, "I have noted wisdom in a burdened ass—at times, wisdom far greater than wisdom displayed by men."

Brahim's sense of humor was acute for he laughed uproariously at the comment. "Those are words fit to be written, Kassim," he cried gleefully—the import of the words flitting over his gross stupidity. "But I am just. An ass is not entitled to bear the seat of judge, but if you can prove your brain superior to that of an ass, I shall omit the fifty lashes which I will declare your punishment and let you wander free." He waited for a reply, chuckling all the while. When Kassim deigned not to speak, he added: "Fifty lashes sometimes terminates in death. I have chosen to administer them myself in this special case."

Kassim's eye did not swerve a trifle. He studied Brahim's beard at some length and then his massive body, and lastly, the golden hydthars on his feet. From here, he turned his gaze to Rahzul and from thence to Abdul, trembling as he was, and uttering curses beneath his breath.

"I would like to know the texture of thine assy test," Kassim said in sober wonder. "Wouldst explain to me?"

Brahim turned about and clapped his hands. Two ragyagyil leaped to the standing jars at the edge of the clearing and rolled three of them forward, on their lower rims. These were aligned in the center of the clearing leaving the remaining three standing behind.

The crowd was pushed aside at the farther gate and two men strode through, pulling at the halter of a stubborn ass. The animal, perturbed by the intense quiet of the assembled throng, balked, but soon gave in and followed to the center of the court.

"I will consider this ass your equal until you've proven your brain superior," Brahim said in grizzled humor. "Note three yonder jars. One is filled with camel's milk, another with oats, and the third is empty. The jars all look alike." He paused as if to let the statement penetrate.

"The ass is hungry," he continued. "It has had neither food nor water since yesterday at dawn. You must know that the ass loves first, and best, the milk; second after that, the oats." He motioned to the attendant who held the animal to release it. The attendant did so, and attracted by the sweet scent of milk and oats—both delicacies to the beast of burden—the ass trotted to the group of jars and smelled of each.

Putting its snout against one of them, it pushed, toppled the jar. The lid fell off and milk spewed to the earth whereupon the ass licked hastily at it until it had drunk some quantity. The ground soaked up the rest. Unhesitatingly, it selected the second jar and toppled it, too. Oats poured out and the ass ate of them until it could eat no more, then took a sniff at the third jar and turned away in disdain.

"You see," said Brahim, "it took first, the loved milk. And then it ate of oats. Lastly, it bothered none with the third jar, because that jar is empty." He clapped his hands again and the jars were taken from the field. The other three jars were rolled into place. "Here's your opportunity. Prove your equality of wisdom to that of yonder beast. Choose, first, the milk, and then the

oats. Fifty lashes by my hand is the penalty and you have but once to miss—and lose."

Kassim, his face expressionless, studied Brahim closely and then turned to the jars. He had known which of the first three had held the milk. Naturally, it had been the heaviest of the group. It was easy to see that it had made the deepest track in the earth over which it had been rolled when the ragyagyil moved it into position. The second heaviest had been the one with the oats; the track was proportionately deep. The empty one had scarcely made a track at all.

It all amused him inwardly—for when the last three jars were rolled forth, all three tracks were of the same shallow depth; they were all empty. And Brahim had cautioned him that he could open but one jar. It had to be a jar of milk, or else!

KASSIM was left with one of two alternatives. He could expose Brahim's trickery and depend on the indignation of the crowd to save his life, or take the punishment.

"I will take the fifty lashes," he decided.

Brahim's face fell. He had not expected this.

"I thought you were stupid," he declared unbelievingly, "but I had never dreamed that you were so stupid that you would not take Brahim's alternative to fifty lashes! See!" and he turned to the Yafrinni. "He whom you thought wise has no intelligence at all—and lest he warp thy happiness with his gross ignorance—greater ignorance than that of a lowly beast—I will deal him fifty lashes, all myself. And know ye, all who watch, that so shall be treated those who mistreat their brethren with such raw schemes of treachery. Abd! The missuwak!"

The compaining drone of an indignant multitude arose like the ominous humming of the storm winds in the minarets.

Abdul's horror burst its bounds. He leaped forward and fell, pleading, at Brahim's feet.

"In the name of Holy Allah, Muslim son of Islam!" he cried. "I have been responsible. Pray do not lash my friend, Kassim. Lash me, fifty—ten thousand strokes instead! He is wholly innocent of this. Lay the blame on me—" and he kissed Brahim's trailing aba.

Before he could take his lips from the silken hem, one of the crowd pressed his way forward into the court, his hand held high in the air, his tone authoritative, his dress, elaborate and gleaming.

"Hold!" he roared and his handsome features climbed to the sky like a bearded minaret. His upraised hand lowered and the rumble of the crowd suddenly died away. "I am Haddji Ahme Abdurrep, a citizen of Yafri ten long generations back," he said angrily. "You are not of Mahmut's blood. You have no right to take a Yafri life excepting in just cause—and Kassim is innocent of these charges. It is evident to the lastest man within this court."

The silence grew and even the vaguest murmurs stopped. Brahim glowered, his wrath verging on the bursting point, but the man's utter disregard for the consequences and the gathering's evident distaste, forced him to restrain himself long enough to allow Abdurrep to finish.

"According to Muslim law," Abdurrep went on flatly, "sympathizers of the sentenced might take a section of his punishment. Unless you accede to this demand, it will be best that you kill the lot of us—for if one remains alive, the whole tale will reach the ears of the Grand

Mufti in Mecca. I swear it on the bread I eat and Allah!"

Brahim remained wordless and all present held their breaths. The moment was as taut as the belly-strap on a saddled camel. His little eyes floated to the faces of the crowd. They were strange faces, too, for tension was written on the last of them.

And this Mufti threat—Abdurrep looked as if he meant every word he uttered, and had sworn to them upon the bread he ate—the most binding oath in Islam. Brahim could not well afford a fizzle on the first case in his records—even if he *could* remain alive until the Mufti came.

He relaxed and laughed. "It is not as bad as all of that," he said, taking another look about and settling his eyes on Kassim. "I am here upon a mission by authority of Mecca. I have proved to yon Yafrinni that there is wisdom in my skull. But there is laughter in my heart, too—and for that, and because I wish to prove to all within the court that the sons of Yafri are my friends as well as subjects, I will that the case be dropped. You are free, Kassim"—and he turned to Abdul—"as you are, too."

He raised his hand that the resultant cheering might stop and when all was quiet again: "But have a care—Brahim is Yafri's tribunal. No one else will judge on the penalty of death!"

Bitter disappointment lined Yafrinni's beards as they filed from the court.

They had seen, for the first time, Brahim's stupidity.

III.

Kassim awoke from the midst of a dream, one morning some time before the dawn. Try as he would to sleep again, he found his attempts useless; sleep had left his eyes completely. At length, he offered Ithin to Allah and went forth for a stroll.

The hour was fresh and dewy and the bakhur in the winds played about his nostrils in fragrant whiffs of sesame and anise. Without care or intent, his hydthar'd tread turned to the fields and across the open valley to the cliffs.

Kassim's brow bent low with worry. Yafri had changed again. Men uttered oaths to cover lies; feuds were reborn and all who went to Brahim came away in worse state than they'd gone. There was no sense to his judgments. His decisions were as apt to come reversed as come correctly. Not only discontent, but thievery and vengeance—and even murder—lined the stony drinking wells.

There was no hope that the Grand Mufti would assign a new Caliph to Yafri in time to quell the vicious lance that prodded the valley's Muslim skins. Brahim's stupidity had grown with the passing of the moons and the sons who once laughed and danced and lived together, now slashed each other's throat and concocted blasphemies—rebellions!

Kassim racked his mind for a solution. He cared neither that his trade had dwindled, nor that Brahim bore him hatred. The Muslim does not think like that.

Kassim thought himself a° triviality in a Mohammedan paradise—and an evil jinni in the form of an egoistic fool was trampling underfoot the nectars of this garden, sowing envy and slinking perfidy within the furrows.

There remained one alternative to revolt; Brahim must somehow be endowed with wisdom. Kassim was not motivated by the envy that had

Virgil Finlay

impregnated all the skins around. He cared—as would any Muslim in the valley—only for Yafri's peace and happiness. And physical impossibility prohibited that alternative.

"But Allah," he thought as he bent his weary legs to climb the precipice, "will not let Yafri die a revolting death." For he knew and believed with true Mohammedan fatalism, that He had ordained that things should happen thusly.

The why of it? Who cared. Fate had decided that Brahim would rule; when Mahmut decided otherwise, so let it be!

The time had flown while his head was bowed in thought, for he was nearly to the summit of the faithful guarding crag. He had not paid mind to where he'd gone—and now? Aha! A spa!

A spring? A pool of water here, so near the valley's edge and upon the topmost pinnacle—within full view of Yafri?

The realization suddenly dawned upon him that no one else had ever climbed the precipice—and here, he'd done it without a painful breath. And there were no springs of water within ten hours' trek from the foot of the barren cliffs.

And the panorama of the dawn. The sun topped the eastern peaks in reddened glory—bathed the gleaming minarets in all the crimsons of the Universe. The scintillations from the spires shot into the sky through an olive pall of weird unearthliness.

When he'd been motionless for some length of time, he shook aside a weary lethargy and took note of a speck of jet on the bloodened disk of the rising sun—a speck that grew and grew until it blotted out the sun, itself!

Kassim stared aghast at the form that stood suspended in the air just beyond the precipice. It seemed human for a moment and for another it did not. Once it changed into a centipede and then into a scorpion and back into a centipede again.

KASSIM blinked his eyes in awe—and when they'd opened, the creature was a man—and what a man he was! His face was full ten thousand times as handsome as a man's; his features, chiseled in symmetry—unlike the sons who trod the lands beneath. And winged! Two of them—distinct and fluttering at such a rate of speed that they were scarcely visible. Indeed, he was not of the earth below but of some realm in the sky, and Kassim wondered if it weren't his lying eye that forced the image there.

"Thy wisdom hasn't quite sufficed, eh, Kassim?" it inquired. "You have been chosen by Allah to be inspired and put back on the earth to prove your Muslim's worth!"

"*Arrasul* Allah!" gasped Kassim, dumfounded. "Allah's messenger—and from the Sun!"

"Yes," it said, "and I have come to grant thee force with which to rend and bow and break and bend Brahim and Rahzul—and all the rest, if you should please." The vision stopped short and changed its shape twoscore times and took the form of man once more—winged, as it had been before. "Think what you can *will* with this long scimitar!" and there came a flash of jewels and gilt and the vision held it by the hilt. "Like this!"

There came a whistling shriek as the crescent struck the peak. Stone and earth and crevices bowed down beneath the roar that echoed in the crags around a thousand leagues or more, then flowed away in molten streams like melted ice and snow—

to vanish in the steaming depths of the singed earth below.

"From end to end of Islam, *Kassim* will be God in place of Allah! You can rule the very sod upon which the camels tread—and as for those you do not love? You can strike them dead!" and the vision smiled a smile that somehow didn't bind, and handed forth the scimitar. "Take it, Kassim, it is thine."

An utter horror had long since replaced the wonder in Kassim's eye. "Thou art no messenger of God!" he cried. "Thou are the jinni. You defy Allah and all the Khoran's sacred passages! Thou art no angel from the skies—you reek a stinking smell of sin. From whence you've come, go back—to hell!"

The vision burst into flame and fire when it heard these curdling tones. It frothed and fumed and shrieked and shrilled and gnashed its bones. Then it changed once more in shape and size and became an honest jinni with hairy arms and ogre chest, and threatened to swallow him.

But Kassim only laughed and spat upon the hideous face. *Poof!* It vanished. Peace reigned o'er the place.

The sun had somehow turned to gold and had climbed the ladder in the sky, a rung or two. Kassim strode sadly to the spring and kneeled to take a drink. His beard dipped in the water with his lips and when he'd freshened himself enough, he made as if to rise.

Seven drops trickled back into the pool from the hair upon his chin. As each drop struck the mirrored surface, a word rang from within: "Allah's will is thine, Muslim son, Kassim!"

They were the words of Mahmut, and Kassim did not doubt their authenticity. He prayed aloud and then rose to his feet and whilst he paced the grass, he thought and thought and then willed himself into an ass!

THE REAPERS had started for the fields. Kassim had planted both his forelegs in the field of one and the other two behind in the grain of his neighbor. When the two who owned the fields approached, they stared, stupefied, at the magnificent apparition.

"'Tis my eyes. I'm seeing things," one uttered in amazement. "An ass as white as anise chaff—the most beautiful ass I have ever seen!"

"Yes!" echoed his neighbor. "And once again as great as any ass mine eyes have ever taken in. It's a mirage—but mirage or not, it's standing on my property!"

"Oho! Not on your life!" the first one laughed. "The hind legs stand on mine!"

Kassim watched them as they approached and stared at him from a position a few paces off.

"'Tmust have wandered from the hills; Yafri boasts no ass like this." The man came a bit closer. "I will take it. It is mine."

"By the hump on thy neck, it isn't!" snapped the other angrily. "It's hind legs are in my sesame. It is mine!" and he thrust the other aside and ran forward, whereupon the first farmer grabbed his neighbor's trailing aba and started to pommel him with his fists. A fight ensued, and Kassim, not caring to have things go too far, rushed forward and thrust his snout between them—bowled one off his feet. The farmers gaped in awe.

"Billah!" shouted the one who had fallen. "It is enchanted!"

Kassim strode apologetically forward, and taking a nip at the man's aba, raised him to his feet, then

brushed the dust from his robes with his gleaming snout.

"Enchanted or not," gasped the other greedily, "it is my ass and I will take it if I have to kill thee for it!" and he made as if to draw a yataghan.

"Wait!" cried the first farmer, for he was unarmed. "Let us fathom this in peace. Mayhap the ass, itself, can figure whom it would choose as master. Whichever field it eats from, then, to the owner it will go."

The other looked begrudgingly about. "All right," he agreed. "As you say."

Kassim looked fearfully at the man whose hand rested upon the knife within his sash, and then began to crop at the tufts of stubble which dotted the line between the fields. Though the men waited patiently, Kassim touched neither one field nor the other, but ate wholly from between.

They were dumfounded.

"It knows—it understands and seeks neither of us as its master!" whispered the armed one. "What shall we do?"

The other thought for a moment, then: "Take the dispute to Brahim!" he said suddenly.

"Bah!" replied the armed one disgustedly. "He is much more stupid than either you or I. His wisdom is full of moth holes; there is not one lone wit within his turban'd skull!" and he thought for a moment. "We may as well, however. Would that we could take the ass to Kassim. But we dare not for fear of Brahim's idiotic envy," and he unwrapped his sash from around his voluminous pantaloons, and holding them with one hand that they might not fall, he strode to the willing Kassim and fastened one end of the sash about his neck. "I will lead it and you can follow," he offered.

So they started back toward the stony streets.

And Kassim grinned as does an ass—for the first time in his life.

IV.

KASSIM had no more than set his pinkish eyes on Brahim than he rose and salaamed, one hoof touching of the earth and then his heart and lips and forehead. Brahim was amazed as were the others and could scarce contain his awe.

Once within the courtyard where none but the guards were about, Brahim sized the beast in detail. Of desert stock and having roamed the flats, he recognized at once the absolutely flawless symmetry of the animal, and Kassim noted with some satisfaction that Brahim's eyes were shining with envy.

The farmers told their tale in detail, leaving nothing out. Brahim neither pondered on the items nor paid heed to either of the two, but kept his eyes on Kassim all the while. Kassim performed away at one side, and ere the case had been stated in full, he knew that he had won the judge.

Brahim abruptly realized that the men awaited judgment.

"It is a case unparalleled," he said rubbing his beard in a gesture of deep thought. "It would be a shame to slice the ass in two." He turned to one of the farmers. "How much would you pay to own the beast?"

The farmer, who happened to be the one who had made as if to draw the yataghan back in the fields, looked belligerently at his neighbor.

"Yafri is not rich enough to buy my half—and I have but little," he said.

Brahim's temper ascended at the retort. However, he smiled a satis-

faction and turned to the other. "And you?" he asked.

The farmer figured for a moment, counted on his fingers and at length offered: "If I sell the field in which he stood, I could, with what I have, raise seven hundred dinnarhs of gold. It's all I own."

"Fine!" grinned Brahim pleasantly. He turned away and motioned to a guard. "Fetch, from Yafri's coffers, two thousand gold dinnarhs—immediately. Give one thousand to each of yonder reapers—and bid them on their way. I'll buy the ass, myself." Whereupon, he turned about, and motioning the guards to bring the ass along, strode toward the stables.

Kassim looked fearfully at the reapers, who had paled to the neckpieces of their dusty cloaks. The armed one fidgeted about his aba—and Kassim knew that he clutched a knife therein. Ill would come of Brahim's selfish decision—and Kassim, himself, had willed it.

Trotting lightly to the man, he thrust his snout beneath the man's aba and rubbed it affectionately against his ribs. The farmer, trembling in his rage and still retaining his hold on his pantaloons, released the knife hilt with his other hand and stroked the ass's neck.

Kassim, with quick dexterity, grasped the knife between his lips and flung it from him. It fell to the earth in a distant corner of the court.

The farmer sucked in his breath sharply and cast a glance at his neighbor again—this time a softer one.

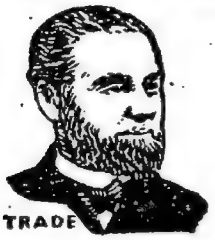
"Thou art a thousand times as wise as all of us in one," he whispered to the ass. "Allah has sent thee from Paradise for some purpose—a good one, I know. You wish that I be friends with yon neighbor. It is only right, for thou art for neither of us."

The guards appeared with the heavy sacks of gold. The farmers were paid and turned to go—and Kassim arose on his hind legs and salaamed his thanks to them.

Brahim had seen the whole procedure, saw the knife in its flight across the court—and his little eyes had become big ones in his awe, for he saw that the disappointed farmers had gone through the gate in fast friendship, laughing between themselves.

BRAHIM POSTED two stable abds to care for the wonder beast. During the days that followed, he whiled away the time between his judgments and solaced himself in his

ROMEOS



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stupid pride by believing that the beast belonged to him.

Kassim did his utmost to impress the senseless Visier, and Brahim watched him amusedly.

"If thou could only speak, Foodooko," he mused aloud one day, "I could consult with thee and betwixt the pair of us, mayhap we could fathom some new discipline to settle Yafri's stupid arguments." He sighed and reached into a pocket of his aba and drew forth a scroll. Idly, he read from it awhile and then said: "I have the case of Nasr on hand this very morn. He has murdered, in the coldest blood, a man by the name of Boolah who had been his enemy for moons and moons long past—Boolah'd threatened vengeance until the very last. Fifteen days ago—and astounded were his friends—Boolah built himself a precedent and married Marriam, a sister of the man he'd professed his hatred for. All who'd known the hatred that reigned between the pair were stunned—and praises filled the air that he who'd sworn vengeance had now complete forgotten. Nasr, in his sense of right, forgave Boolah and was friendly toward the husband of his sister.

"Three short days ago, Boolah—before Nasr struck him dead—sharpened up his scimitar and took the lovely head of Marriam, his wife. The case was brought to me and in all tranquillity, Boolah charged that he had found Marriam within another's arms. It was none other than Boolah's bosom friend.

"As is the Muslim law, Boolah was justified in killing her, so I released him.

"Yesterday Nasr, the brother of the girl who had been decapitated, vent his wrath on Boolah—killed him after he had been vindicated of the charge of taking Marriam's lovely Muslim head.

"And today I must decree that Nasr killed without justification and that he die at the blade of my beheader." Brahim stopped his musings and slipped the scroll back into his aba. "But something's wrong somewhere—and I've thought and thought and cannot fathom a reply. Now I waste my time in thinking once again. Bah—let him die!"

The ass, Kassim, had pricked up his ears in heed to every trifling item and had allowed Brahim to read and muse upon the case aloud without distraction.

When Brahim had finished and proceeded to renew his admiration for the animal once again, Kassim reached a nipping snout and grasped Brahim's aba, faced the judge about. The giant turned in mute surprise and followed Kassim through the stable door and into the fenced-in yard beyond.

When they'd reached a space whose earth was smooth, untrampled by the horses of the place, Kassim started to write on the even ground. Brahim watched Kassim's hoof in silence, and viewed the words the ass had scrawled before his very eyes, marveling at their flowing rhythm and the fineness of their size.

"Praise to Allah!" the giant gasped when Kassim stepped aside. Speechless with astonishment, he read the written tide:

> Boolah spoke of vengeance Billah. During the moons that passed before, he willed Nasr dead. Not having opportunity to carry out his crime, he sought vengeance through Nasr's sister, used her at the time as a tool to wreak his spleen upon his hated enemy. Nasr was fully justified—turn the Muslim free.

The blood drained from Brahim's

face and his beard shone oily and black against the sudden whiting of his skin. "Wisdom from an ass," he breathed. "Wisdom the like of which I have never heard before! Not only do you understand—but you can write!" He leaped forward and embraced Kassim's fleecy neck and showered kisses on his snout. "And together," he cried, "I with my tongue, and you, your hoof—Islam will rock to the lastest stone built in the Mecca Mosques. Even the blind will know and see—and for it, the richest grain and sesame will be yours. *Bissmillah!*"

In his bliss and glee, Brahim lifted the ass clear from the ground and crushed it to him until Kassim thought his ribs would break. "I should have seen Boolah's motive for marrying Nasr's sister! Certainly Nasr was justified in vengeance—and I will free him! But first I will proclaim that all should come and listen—" and he stopped short. "No one must know, Foodooko, that I have got my wisdom from an assy hoof—promise me."

Kassim brayed and nodded of his head. He cared neither for the credit nor the glory; Brahim might have that if he chose. Kassim only wanted the Yafrinni's happiness.

When Brahim proclaimed his judgment to the court that day, the onlookers were bowled over with amazement. Such wisdom had never come from Brahim's lips before.

Kassim brayed his satisfaction and asked Brahim to allow him to sit in upon the trials. Brahim saw the wisdom of the suggestion and built a marble stall just beyond the walls of the judgment chambers. The wall was then pierced with a number of tiny apertures and draped over with sheer silk that Kassim might hear all without being seen. Only two knew the purpose of the secret passageway and chamber.

As the days flitted onward, Kassim scrawled his verdicts on the floor —sometimes on the walls—with a hoof dipped lightly in an urn of oil. And ere the letters of the judgments flowed together, Brahim had grasped their wisdom. The participants of the varied disputes were then beckoned again on the following morning and Brahim, in great solemnity, gave Kassim's judgments as his own—to the very word.

Yafri was astounded to the roots.

A BARE thin moon passed thusly and Yafri was smiling again. Within another, those who had borne hatred for Brahim before, found it difficult to hate him any more. No one knew the secret of his wisdom; all they knew was that he had suddenly attained a thousand years of intelligence in the passing of one single night.

And Brahim's fame spread; Yafri's door was pierced by Brahim's messengers, who strewed reports to the Mosques of Mecca, to Iran and Bagdat and Damascus. The members of Brahim's own tribe laughed in disbelief. But when examples of Brahim's wit were laid before them, they were forced to believe.

Moons passed again. Winter came and went. The last feud had been settled, the last dispute decided. Laughter and love rang from field to crag as of old. Kassim had accomplished his purpose—may Allah feed him *lub'n* and *pilaf!* May he rest in *el-harram* with ten thousand Muslim wives to suit his every whim. Let abds, Allah, fan his unselfish brow, and let the bakhur in the breezes tickle the walnut in his throat that he might laugh in happiness until the end of time!

V.

NOW THAT PEACE had been rebrought to Yafri's brow, Kassim became restless in his silvery hide. He had endeavored—a hundred times or so—to teach Brahim to think. Each time, before he gave his verdict in the case, he asked the judge his notion of the dispute. Each time, the judgment of Brahim was poor and led in the wrong direction. The responsibility which Kassim bore in Brahim's stead had even thickened Brahim's skull until at length, there was left no wit at all.

Kassim knew that this could not go on forever. He was becoming impatient—and worried, too.

No, he decided once and for all. It shouldn't be—this must end. Here, within the palace stables—

Brahim burst through the doorway, jabbering aloud to himself.

"Foodooko!" he cried elatedly, endeavoring the impossible task of holding his booming voice down to a whisper. "Look! the seal of Islam once again!" and he waved a parchment before Kassim's snout. "The Grand Mufti is coming—and with him, he announces two Caliphs! Ibn Seleem—none other—is one. He rules the desert palms from Waddi Atteyba at Yafri's doors, to the mountains of Damascus! Ghazih, of Irak, is the other! The two powers of Islam's widest lands—and the one, supreme, Grand Mufti! They come to hear my judgment!" He stopped short and leered at the doors and other openings within the stable walls. "If I could but impress them—why not Brahim, the first Caliph to take a throne lacking Mahmut's blood?"

He arose to all his height and looked challengingly about. "I have provided justice until today. All Yafri weeps with happiness. Why not *Caliph* Brahim instead of Brahim?"

Kassim deigned not to budge a hoof, but stood stock-still and stared glumly at the polished floors.

"I shall go," Brahim continued, "to make preparations for the great reception. Every last son of Yafri shall participate. There will be veils of Yafri's bakhur incense drifting down from Paradise, and from the gorge, a carpet of unthreshed sesame. Each ragyil Yafrinni shall polish his scimitar and stand in mute salute. The fastest camels and the trimmest stallions shall race the course at yonder edge of town. My guests shall see Yafri's hospitality—and the love my subjects hold for me."

Whereupon he wheeled about and vanished through the door.

Kassim paled within his hairy hide. This was something else, again. Surely neither Seleem nor Ghazih would come to rule the tiny valley. They were both Caliphs—and powerful—of the Negd and of Irak. And yet the Mufti announced no other.

Now Brahim, in all his egoism, harbored dreams unthinkable. He willed to be *Caliph!* Kassim shuddered. No, he decided, it couldn't be!

But suppose the Mufti heard Yafri's love for him—and they loved him now, Kassim knew. Yafri's erstwhile disgust and enmity for Brahim had worn off into the winds during the preceding moons of kindness and justice. Brahim had been vindicated in Yafrinni's eyes; men had forgotten the triviality of Brahim's unparalleled stupidity of the first few moons of his reign.

Suppose the Mufti chose to allow Brahim the seat of Caliph?

No! It would chain Kassim to the

figure of an ass until eternity! Greater yet, it would be sacrilege—and Kassim, himself, had willed it all.

It was fully three days before Kassim saw Brahim again. He had postponed all matters of state until the Mufti's visit should terminate. And when he burst into Kassim's quarters, there was that same eagerness in his beard that Kassim had seen before.

"Foodooko—loving Foodooko!" Brahim whispered, beside himself with exciteemnt. "They have come—and worried, too—that I might judge," and his words came with enthralled deliberation, "that I, *Brahim*, might judge a case which no one else has dared to venture judgment on!" He slapped his thigh in glee and then stepped close again.

"I have spoken to the Mufti. He was much impressed by the cheering Muslim sons about and heard their love for me. There is no Caliph in Islam who might rule this Yafri valley for ten more years to come. If my judgment of the case is what he expects of me—from what he's heard in Mecca of my wisdom—he believes that I can be put onto the throne and declared blood-son of Mohammed. Thus I'll rule the people whom he has known to love me! It will be the first time in Allah's history!"

Trembling from massive head to foot, he stooped close so that his lips touched Kassim's hairy ear.

"The case will be tried on the morrow at the second Ithin cry. Secrete yourself within our private chamber where you can hear all that will transpire. Then I will ask a day to deliberate whilst they are entertained. Then we can pitch our heads together and figure out the enigma. Then, when I'm Caliph, we shall never worry again for either of our fates!" He looked hurriedly about for fear someone had heard. "I'll go now. Eat well of thine oats and drink of yonder nectar."

The following day, when the second Ithin cry had come, Kassim waited until he saw that all had left the stable and then willed himself back into the form of man. The though had no more than pierced his mind that he was as he had bidden—two-legged, upright, encumbered neither by towering ears nor heavy hoof. He felt of himself from head to foot and laughed aloud, deciding then and there that he would not be an ass for very long, again.

Quickly, he made his way through the secret passageway and to the darkened chamber where he pried his ear to an aperture. He could hear all that went on in the court beyond.

The Mufti spoke first, tried to impress Brahim with the importance of his decision—added that no reply at all would be better than a poor one. Brahim merely laughed his confidence and bade Ghazih, the Caliph of Irak, to tell his version.

And Ghazih did—with all the bitterness and eloquence at his learned command. His tone lacked the zeal of peaceful solution; belligerent and explicit, he stated his side of the case without consideration for his rival.

It seems that a tiny valley, which lay upon the borders of Irak and Negd, had once belonged to his people. Seventeen years prior, the people of Seleem had purloined it, neither with permission nor by lawful trade. The valley was barren and dry—unfit for aught but grazing and mayhap a furrow or two of wheat. Three years later, a stream suddenly changed its course and poured into the valley. Where it

had been desert before, within two years it had become a paradise. That paradise had been retained by Seleem.

Ghazih insisted that it did not belong to Seleem. It belonged to Irak, for Irak had owned it for generations. Now his legions waited in the hills upon the Bagdat side—and they bade to take it either by word or scimitar.

"*Rahman Rahim!*" mumbled Kassim to himself, within the secret chamber. "The man is quite determined—and according to his story, justly, too. But there must be another version—"

It was some time before Kassim heard the voice of Seleem and he pressed his head to the crack and listened. When the Caliph spoke, the weariness of years cut full in half, the volume of his voice. Seleem was an old, old man.

"I am Ibn Seleem, granduncle to yon brother, Ghazih," he said. His words were piercing, though soft and scarcely audible. "Yon nephew told the truth—but he deigned not to add that my bedouin desert sons were the ones who labored three entire winters to turn the stream into the valley from a nearby useless river-route. We made a paradise of it, ourselves. When we took possession of the barren spot, there was naught but barren earth—unfit for either crops or habitation. Irak did not stoop to halt the pace—but allowed my sons to take the place. And now that it's a paradise and the crops of wheat and rice stand as high as these marble walls around"—the voice hesitated as if already wearied by the effort—"and now that the desert land has been made into a garden, yon nephew craves to take it back."

The old man sighed, and continued: "I am tired. I am much too old a Muslim son to travel such a length. My legions are massed upon the valley's borders and bid to scimitar their brethren rather than to let their sons give up that for which they've worked one half a generation. 'Twould be very much as if you had taken a block of jagged stone from yonder mountaintops and he who saw you, spoke not a word—and after you had hewn the stone to beauty and from it built a temple unsurpassed, then he willed to take it back as if it were his own. No. My legions wait your decision. The first Muslim son of Irak who treads this paradise, will die!"

"By the hump on thy neck, he won't!" spat Ghazih, shrilly. "By the Khoran and Mahmut, the valley has never been thine own—but mine. And ten thousand sons will flash their scimitars when I return—"

Kassim willed himself upon the avenue beyond the palace walls.

VI.

In the cobblery on the Avenue of Stones, Kassim went about his work once again—and all the while, Brahim thundered through the palace halls and bent his neck in frantic search of an ass to render him a wisdom that he needed direly.

And when he'd searched passageway and chamber—and every other nook within the parapets—and found no sign of Kassim, he raved and ranted and tore his beard and screamed vile epithets. By night he had dispatched his guards to search the fields—the cliffs, themselves—for a white ass, and threatened death if it weren't found.

But dawn came around and there was no Foodooko to impregnate his brain with wisdom.

"Dastards!" he shrieked to the

ragyagyil who returned empty-handed. "Bring me asses—all the asses you can find! Foodooko may have been stolen and dyed some other color. Fetch them to the palace stables and bathe them one and all—Foodooko must be found!"

When the second Ithin cry had beckoned to the kings, he asked for one more day to think the problem over. All the while, with what he thought sincerity, Brahim assured them that he'd solved the case and merely wished to check his wise results.

The disputing Caliphs scowled and fumed—and bade that for one more day, they'd wait ere they went to war.

The guards who had been dispatched for asses searched the valley grasses from one end of Yafri to the other. Then they searched the hills around and covered every league of ground from Yemin ass trail to the gorge of Atteyba. By night, the palace yards and its garden's healthy swards were reduced to trampled earth and beastly dung. Brahim overseered the task—and no one dared to ask why the asses had been lathered, one by one.

Out upon the avenue, Yafrinni gathered close about and waited until the idiotic task had been completed. Then ensued fights and brawls as to whom the beasts belonged, for none could recognize his own once they had been bathed and the dirt of years had vanished from their skins.

Once again, Brahim was forced to ask another day's respite. This time the argument tore the marble walls

in two, so vicious were the epithets of those who quarreled. The Mufti saved Brahim, however, and assured the disputing Caliphs that it would be the lastest wait.

In desperation, the ogre-judge bent his mind to thought and figured what he believed a solution to the dispute. And it was a senseless one, as usual. The result would surely pitch the legions into war. But rather than send the arguers away unanswered, Brahim chose to take a stab at random at the question and hoped it would fit the quarrelers' digestion.

The third day came—as the days are wont. The second Ithin cry had rung again. The assembly gathered, and after prayer, all pushed aside their turban folds and listened. The Caliphs fidgeted within their cloaks and cast frigid stares at each other. The Mufti struggled with a lump that snagged his throat and failing to dislodge it, held his breath as Brahim's cavelike mouth opened to speak.

"I, Brahim," the judge began, "ordain that the disputed land—".

There was a sudden uproar at the chamber door. The guards were bowled aside, and into the room, head held high in the air and braying all the while, pranced the assed form of Kassim.

There came a sudden hiss of sucking breaths intermingled with the scurry of feet and curses of those who were insulted at the intrusion. Brahim's words had frozen on his tongue and he stared in astonishment at the apparition.

"Foodooko!" he cried elatedly. Leaping from the dais, he threw his arms about Kassim in a frenzied glee.

The Grand Mufti rose upright to his feet. Both Caliphs followed suit, their eyes flashing with wrath and insult.

Brahim wheeled upon them and raised his hand commandingly. "Be seated, brethren," he roared, "whilst I take my ass to stable and return!" and he made as if to lead Kassim through the door.

Kassim balked and was showered with oaths and curses from Seleem and Ghazih.

"Take thine ass to stable!" the latter shrieked. "Take thine ass to stable whilst we wait upon thy wisdom?"

"The man is mad!" rasped Seleem, whereupon Kassim tore away from Brahim's arms and leaped to the dais. His shining hoofs reared in the air and vanished. Kassim, the cobbler, stood there.

GASPS of awe hissed through the turbulent atmosphere and there came a crescendo of thumps as knees struck the floor in prayer. Brahim stood petrified upon the spot, his jaw agape, his eyes bulging.

Kassim bid them rise and listen—but no awe left a solitary eye. Ensued a few moments of deathly silence and Kassim turned to Brahim.

"Allah wills that you should look your wisdom, Brahim," he said wearily.

The onlookers' eyes drifted back to Brahim in inquiry—and then opened wide and almost popped clear of their sockets at what they saw.

Brahim's turban was not on his head where it belonged, but was supported two palms or so above it—by the tips of two asses' ears! And Brahim gave no evidence of knowing what had happened to him for he stared stupidly at the amazed faces about.

"I bid you go to yonder wall where

the gilt of gold is smooth," directed Kassim. "Look at your reflection."

Brahim looked undecidedly at the Mufti and then obeyed. He had no more than caught a glimpse of himself than he uttered a shriek that startled even those who had expected it. Horrified, unbelieving, he felt of the huge ears with a trembling hand and then wheeled about and plunged madly from the room, bowling over all who were in his path. When his cries had died in the distance and all was quiet again, Kassim turned to the Caliphs.

"Each of you believe," he said with sober tone, "that this valley on your borders should be, by rights, your own. And you both have told, with blasphemy, that legions wait nearby to rend thy brethren shred to shred that the scimitar could vie to see which one will take the valley paradise." He paused.

"I agree," and he looked thoughtfully at the Mufti. "I bid that you might fight to death—until the valley's hidden shoulder high in Muslim flesh and sons have ridden down the souls who fled to hide in nearby mountaintops—until they, too, are dead."

Kassim's voice and eyes trailed off into the distance and then returned.

"'*But*"—and he said it with great emphasis—"he who wins the war shall not have the valley! I decree and Allah, almighty, chooses that the valley go to the legion which fights the fight and *loses!*"

The Caliphs gasped and turned their eyes in inquiry. At length, one turned to Kassim. Kassim saw that he willed to speak and motioned him to suit his whim.

"Prophet of Allah," he said in humble tone, "we both wish the argued spot, but if we fight to win the war to *lose* our objective,'twill be quite senseless for us to have fought at all."

Kassim smiled. "Then you understood my words, the two of you. In the meantime, leave the valley to the people who live within it now. I want Billah your vow you'll buy their crops cut into two; one half to him and one half to you. Pay the farmers a lawful price for their hard-worked wheat and rice. And if"—and his tone sharpened—" a sword is bared in the passes, you'll both sprout ears like burdened asses!"

The Caliphs looked at each other in utter horror. The Mufti smiled broadly and all within the room followed suit until their smiles turned to laughs and the corridors rang with their mirth. The disputers squirmed about upon their rugs and cast venomous glances at the men who sat arrear—but when they looked upon one another, Kassim noted that they cast loving smiles.

"Don't let harsh thoughts pierce your whim—you saw and heard Brahim." Kassim arose from the dais and came forward. "Go forth in peace as friends—until eternity."

And ere the Caliphs went, you'd think they'd been in love with one another all their lives, for they were already planning feasts where their legions would use their scimitars to slice pilaf and lamb.

Later on, that same day, Kassim told the Mufti his story, end to end. And the Mufti bade him be Caliph—bade that Allah surely must have willed it. Kassim laughed and said it wasn't right. None but Mohammed's blood descendants might bear the sacred title.

And that is how Kassim El Dalil, the son of Meth'sullah, the cobbler of the Avenue of Stones, became the Grand Visier of the crag-bound realm of Yafri.

THE PSYCHOMORPH

by E. A. GROSSER

A very pleasing personality, the Psychomorph. Always the person you most wanted to see—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Two men sat in front of the entirely useless fireplace, watching the flames. They were roughing it in a centrally heated mountain lodge. Suddenly two words quavered on the crisp spring evening air:

"I'm co-old!"

Baker, a few years older and heavier of build, mumbled at him around the stem of his pipe, "Well, move closer to the fire then, Manning. But don't cry about it."

Manning looked up. "What's the matter with you?" he asked resentfully. "I didn't say anything."

Baker sucked noisily at his pipe, got a drink, and made a wry face.

"Imagination, maybe," he said doubtfully after a moment. "I thought I heard someone say, 'I'm cold!'—almost crying."

"I was thinking," Manning replied indifferently; intimating that he hadn't said anything, hadn't heard anything, and didn't give a damn.

Baker grinned. "Thinking of Elaine?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Peggy shouldn't have insisted. Elaine didn't want to go to town."

"And you didn't want her to go," Baker completed with a laugh. "It'll be different in a few years. Peggy was damned glad to get away from me for a while, and I was just as glad to have her go."

"Don't you . . . uh . . . love her?"

"Sure! Don't be silly. But a change is good for anyone. She wouldn't look at another man—I hope!"

"I'm so cold. Let me in."

Both men tensed. The sound seemed to have come from outside.

"By God!" Baker exploded. "I didn't imagine that! Did you hear it, too?"

Manning nodded. Baker laid his pipe on the table and went to the door. Hand on the latch, he waited, listening.

"I'm so-o-o-o—" There was the sound of something falling.

Baker snatched open the door. Then he knelt beside the crumpled figure on the doorstep.

"You little fool! Don't you know enough to knock on a door?"

Smooth, silken blond hair had cascaded forward, hiding the face but exposing a satin-skinned neck. The unconscious girl wasn't wearing a coat—just a light jacket over a colorful frock. Something about them struck Baker as familiar.

He grasped the soft shoulders and half lifted her, then brushed her hair from her face. The flesh was cold and puttylike beneath his hand, and the hair tangled his fingers as though alive. But he hardly noticed. His eyes were fastened on the quiet face.

"Peggy! Oh, God! They must have had an accident with the car!" He lifted the still form in his arms and started toward the bedroom. "Manning! You go down the mountain and find Elaine."

But Manning was staring at the figure in his arms like a man hypnotized. "Pat—Patricia," he mumbled. "You shouldn't have followed." He stepped forward with arms out, as though to take Baker's burden.

"Manning! You fool! Can't you hear? I'll take care of Peggy. You go down and find Elaine!"

THE TELEPHONE started to ring, one or two short, sharp yelps and then a continuous strident alarm, as though the girl at central had grown tired and were resting on the switch.

Baker shouldered Manning aside. "Then answer that phone, and I'll get Elaine myself after I've taken care of Peggy."

He looked back as he went through the door and saw Manning moving toward the phone like an automaton. He kicked open the bedroom door and gently laid Peggy on the bed. Then hurried out to get the electric blanket. The coldness of her flesh frightened him.

Manning was standing at the table, telephone receiver dangling in his fingers. His eyes were pale and

frightened as he looked up at Baker's entrance.

Baker started across the room toward the closet. Manning held out the telephone to him.

"Here," he said tonelessly.

Baker brushed him aside again. His lips curled as he looked at the younger man. "Aren't you a little curious about Elaine?"

Manning looked toward the door leading to the bedroom, then back at Baker. "Here," he said again.

"Hang up!" Baker said. "I haven't got time to talk to anyone now. Do you think it's within your capabilities to phone for a doctor?"

"Here," Manning insisted, offering the phone again. "It's Peggy. She wants to talk to you."

"Huh!" Baker ceased burrowing in the closet and faced Manning with questioning eyes.

"You're crazy," he said, but nevertheless he took the telephone from the younger man's hand.

"Hello!" he barked.

"O-o-oh! What a nasty voice you have!"

"The better to—" he started from habit, then halted. "Is that you, Peggy?"

"Uh-hm-m-m," she replied. "Who were you expecting?"

Baker ignored her question, though he couldn't doubt her words. Her voice was too familiar. But Peggy was in the bedroom!

"Are you sure?" he asked inanely.

"Yes, certain!" Peggy snapped. "And you leave the liquor alone for the rest of the evening." She stopped then, seeming to regret her words. "Listen, darling," she continued, "Drew Pierce's new picture, 'Sands of Flame,' is playing here tonight and Elaine and I want to see it. Do you mind?"

"Put it off! Will you, Peg? Somebody just wandered in and fainted on our doorstep."

He waited for her to speak, but she hesitated doubtfully. He knew what she was thinking. He hurried on: "She looks just like—" He stopped short. He had intended to tell her that the stranger looked just like her, but under the circumstances he knew that to be inadvisable. "She looks just like a queen—a beauty!"

"And you want me to come home?" Peggy teased.

"Yes! This is straight goods, Peg. Come on and give me a hand. There's something wrong. It's only pleasantly cool out to-night, yet she's as cold as an iceberg."

"Oh," Peggy said understandingly. Then she was serious. "I'll come, and bring a doctor."

"Thanks, baby. 'By."

He started to hang up, but a call from the phone made him put it back to his ear.

"George, darling," Peggy said.

"Yes?"

"If you're tight, I'll help him use a stomach pump on you."

"And I'll let you. It's a deal! Now, hurry!"

He put the phone back in its cradle and turned to face Manning. Manning was gone! Baker listened and thought he heard a voice from the bedroom. He cursed and dug hurriedly in the closet until he located the electric blanket, then started back to the bedroom.

Manning was on his knees at the side of the bed. He held one of the strange girl's nearly frozen hands in his, pressing it to his lips.

"Patricia! Don't die! You must live! We have so much to live for—so much to do! We were silly to quarrel, and I was a beast to marry Elaine. I don't know why I did. I was mad! I wanted to hurt you!"

Baker stepped into the room. Manning looked up, flushed guiltily, but didn't leave the bedside.

"There's more to you, kid, than I thought," Baker grumbled, then smiled bitterly. "And to think I was giving you advice. Come on! Give me a hand!"

Together they wrapped the strange girl in the heating blanket, then watched. Gradually color came back to her face. Baker had to admit she was pretty; as pretty as Peggy had been on their wedding day. And so much like her that they might have been twin sisters.

"How is it you never mentioned knowing a girl who looks so much like Peggy?" he asked.

Manning looked at him oddly. "What do you mean—so much like Peggy? Patricia doesn't look anything like your wife."

Baker stared at him. "One of us is nuts," he said at last, and the stare left no doubt as to who, in his opinion, was the one.

Manning shrugged, and his eyes went back to the girl as though drawn by a magnet. Baker looked, too. Her cheeks, counterparts of Peggy's, were flushing with returning life. The tightness had left the mouth and it appeared soft and inviting.

"It's going to be rough on Elaine," he said.

"Don't say anything," Manning pleaded. "I'm the one to tell her."

"O. K., but see that you do. Don't be a bigger heel than you are already."

It was as though Manning hadn't heard him. Baker stared at a spot a trifle to one side of the point of the younger man's chin. He considered how nice it would feel to hit that spot with a bunch of knuckles. It was a raw deal he was handing to a young kid like Elaine!

He turned abruptly on his heel and went out the door, growling, "I guess you can keep an eye on her until the girls and the doctor get here."

He went back to his seat in front of the fire and waited. He tried not to think. He listened. From the bedroom came Manning's pleading monotone. The damned young fool had no sense of shame! Baker gritted his teeth.

Then, for something to do, he cleaned and filled his pipe. Manning's pleas had ceased. The house was as silent as a mine, except for the crackling of the fire. He scratched a match to light his pipe.

A door creaked protestingly. Baker leaped to his feet and faced the direction from which the sound had come. Then the tenseness left his muscles.

THE STRANGER was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, smiling, holding onto the door which he had left open as though to support herself. Her smile was infectious. Baker smiled. He looked past her, into the bedroom, expecting to see Manning directly behind her. But he wasn't to be seen.

"You should stay in bed," he reproved. He felt that it was like scolding Peggy. "Where's Manning?"

The strange girl smiled and stepped into the hall. She pulled the door shut and it creaked protestingly again. She walked toward him slowly, glidingly—smiling.

"The poor boy was tired," she said with a queerness in her voice that Baker hesitated to label an accent. "He was so tired that he fell asleep on his knees at the side of the bed with my hand at his lips. Oh, what a nice fire—so warm!"

She tugged at one of the chairs to

draw it closer. Baker stooped to help her. His hands touched hers, and he tensed. Her flesh was as cold as a reptile's.

He looked up, and into eyes that were identical with Peggy's. He shook his head and shoved the chair nearer the fire. It was too much for him.

He sat down again in the other chair and struck another match to light his pipe. He puffed contentedly, waiting to see what she would say. He wished he had the nerve to ask how much she cared for Manning—wished he could persuade her to throw him down hard—leave him for Elaine. Elaine—who had been almost pitifully happy for two months.

"You are a strange man," the girl said at last.

"Yes," Baker returned.

"Yes," she agreed with a dimpling smile. "The other—Manning—talks all the time. You talk not at all—just puff-puff-puff. And you look so comfortable."

It seemed to Baker that she moved imperceptibly closer to the fire. He watched her through narrowed eyes. "You speak as though you don't know Manning very well," he sparred.

She ignored his remark and stared at his pipe. "You look so comfortable," she repeated. "May I try it?"

"What? My pipe?"

She nodded, and Baker laughed.

"Anybody'd think you'd never seen a pipe before," he chuckled.

She was silent, so silent that Baker felt that he must have hurt her feelings. He held out the pipe to her. "Here, take a puff if you want to. But look out—it's strong."

He had to lean toward her to give her the pipe. She took it with a smile, looked at it strangely, then placed the stem between her lips. She breathed deeply.

Baker grinned, expecting her to cough. But she blew the smoke from her throat with an expression of disgust and returned the pipe. He took it, staring at her, and it was a moment before he became aware that their hands were still in contact.

An aura of power seemed to emanate from her, surround him, sap his will. Anyway, what was the difference? It would be like making love to Peggy, this stranger was so much like her. And he knew from the blue eyes so near his that she was willing. He leaned forward—and seemed to catapult into a mist-filled pit.

Cold fingers of fog curled around him, searching for—life. And sucking away all his warmth. It seemed hours that he shivered and trembled, then a voice reached him.

"No. Not all—now! Come back!"

He lifted his head. He had fallen sideward over the arm of his chair. He shook his head to clear his sight. He looked at the other chair. It was empty!

He heard feet on the stairs and a moment later the door opened to admit Peggy, Elaine, and a wizened doctor. Baker lumbered to his feet, staggered to meet them. Peggy watched him critically, then slipped her jacket off and laid it over the back of a chair.

"All right, doctor," she said, "the stomach pump."

"Wait! Peggy, I haven't been drinking."

"I didn't say you had. I just know you're higher than a kite."

"But she was here a minute ago," Baker said. He cursed the thickness of his tongue and the dullness of his mind. He couldn't seem to think.

Then he saw that they were star-

ing past him. He turned. Peggy's replica was standing in the hall, watching them.

"Drew Pierce," Peggy breathed. "How did he get here?"

"Martha!" the doctor exclaimed. "Why didn't you stay home?"

Elaine ran across the room and threw herself into the strange girl's arms—kissed her. "It's been six hours since I left you, Fred, but it seems like a century."

"That's her!" Baker shouted, thinking of the stomach pump. "That's the patient."

"Her?" repeated Peggy. "Now I know you're drunk. Calling Drew Pierce 'she,' or, rather, 'her'!"

She looked at him disgustedly, then started toward the hall, carefully going aside for Elaine and the strange girl. "It's a neat trick, Elaine. I never knew you had the nerve. Get ready Mr. Pierce. I'll be back in a moment like a flash."

She opened the bedroom door. The hinges squealed, then she screamed.

"George! George! Is he dead?"

Baker staggered toward her. He put his arm around her shoulder and guided her back into the hall. The doctor kneeled beside the sprawled body on the floor.

Baker halted at the door of another bedroom and looked back to see Elaine huddling fearfully in the arms of the stranger. The stranger was walking slowly, almost gliding, toward the door of the room where the body lay. He waited to see what would happen.

The strange smile was still curving the unknown's lips. And there was no change when she looked into the room and saw the wizened doctor working over Manning.

But Elaine looked, started violently. She looked up into the face of the stranger, peered closely as though searching for something, then pressed closer.

Baker turned away and helped Peggy into the extra bedroom.

When they were inside, Peggy's hands gripped the lapels of his coat. "George," she whispered hoarsely, "did you kill him?"

He stared at her.

"Tell me! Tell me!" she insisted, still in a low voice and trying to shake him. "Did you kill Fred? Quick! Maybe we can get away! We'll rip out the phones and disable all the cars but ours. Maybe we could make it to an airport and get out of the country."

His lips twitched as he held her away from him. "Listen, baby! I didn't kill anybody. I think your 'Drew Pierce' did! But don't you say a damned thing. There's something queer about 'him,' or 'her,' and they might pin it on me. You keep quiet, see?"

Peggy was quieter and looking at him with penetrating eyes. Then she said: "You needn't be afraid to tell me, if you did. I hated the dirty little stinker. I knew Patricia and why he married Elaine."

"Does Elaine know?"

"Certainly. 'Friends' saw to it that she found out. But she didn't care."

Baker hesitated. It was as though he were afraid to ask a question, but at last he forced it out: "What kind of a looking person was she?"

"Pretty—red hair, very fair skin with just enough freckles on her nose to make her pert. Oh, *she* was all right! And she had sense enough to see that Fred was a heel."

She stopped speaking and stared at Baker.

"What's the matter, George? You look sick!"

"I am! God! I wonder what it is."

"Wonder what what is?"

"That . . . that thing! To you it looks like Drew Pierce, the actor; to me it looks like you; to Elaine it is Fred; and the doctor thinks it is someone by the name of Martha."

"George! Haven't you been drinking?" There was an hysterical note in Peggy's voice as though she hoped he would say "Yes."

"No! I haven't had a drop since three o'clock this afternoon."

She believed; she had to. There was no reason for him to lie, and she knew he hadn't. Something very like an unconscious whimper came from deep within her throat.

Baker looked down at her. Her rouge showed like two bloody spots on her bloodless cheeks. There was a whiteness around her mouth that was only accented by the vividness of her lips. He drew her closer.

"Let's get out of here," she begged. "Let's go back to town."

"We can't, honey," he said, and kissed her. "That thing, whatever it is, is deadly. It killed Manning!"

"What do we care?" she demanded. "He was a dirty little rat. It served him right!"

"Peggy! He's dead!"

"What difference does that make? It doesn't make him a better man. I hope he roasts in hell!"

"Peggy! You're hysterical! You need rest."

"I do not! I want to leave here!"

He forced her toward the bed. "You lie down and rest for a while. I'll figure out some way to fix Peggy-Pierce-Fred-Martha, and then we'll leave."

She fought him, silently, determinedly. But in the end his superior strength prevailed. She was on the bed. He held her hands so she couldn't scratch. In a moment she ceased struggling and lay still, glaring up at him.

"Listen, baby," he pleaded. "We can't let that thing loose on the world. It isn't human! I know it —feel it!"

He waited, searching her face to see if he had made any impression. Her lips trembled and she caught the lower one between her white teeth. Her eyes filled with tears. She turned her head away.

"I want to go away."

He watched her. He knew the depths of her fear. Only the memory of those cold, searching mists made him resolve to stay and kill the thing. But that was no reason why Peggy should have to stay!

"The doctor will be going back before long. You can go with him."

"I want you to come."

"I have to stay," he burst out.

"I won't go unless you do."

He released her hands and stood up. "We'll see," he said. "Anyway, you must rest for a while."

She said nothing as he went out the door and closed it silently behind him. Then he stopped short. Peggy was standing in the hall.

IT TOOK a moment for him to realize that he wasn't seeing Peggy, but the stranger. Then he smiled bitterly and let his hand fall from the doorknob. The stranger smiled, too. And moved toward him.

It pressed close to his side and attempted to lift his arm over its shoulders. He shuddered and pushed it away. It staggered across the hall and brought up against the wall with a thump, and regarded him with sorrowful eyes.

Baker felt conscience-stricken. That bump must have hurt. The eyes were still on him, gentle and reproachful. He went to its side and helped it to its feet. Together they

started down the hall toward the living room. His arm was around the stranger.

They came to the door of the room he had occupied with Peggy before the stranger had come, the room to which he had carried the stranger and in which it had killed Manning. He looked inside. Manning's body was gone. There was nothing unusual about its being gone; the doctor had probably moved it. But the fact seemed for a moment to thrust back the mists that were surrounding his mind.

With sudden determination he shoved the stranger from him and into the empty room. Then he slammed the door shut and tried to lock it. Futilely he cursed the maker of the lock. There was no key! It could only be locked from the inside!

He held the door tight while the stranger wailed, "Let me out! Please!"

After a moment he wondered why the thing didn't try the lock, try to pull the door open. It never touched the door; it only pleaded to be freed.

He released the doorknob and stepped back, waiting. Still the stranger didn't open the door. Baker grinned. Was it possible that it didn't know anything about doors; had never seen one before? Not if it were a creature of this Earth, he decided. But was there and proof, or even indication, that the stranger was of this planet? Might it not be a wanderer from some other hellish sphere?

He shivered and hurried to the living room, through it to the library, and opened the table drawer. A small-caliber automatic lay atop some papers. He took it out, checked to see that it was loaded, then shoved it into his pocket.

When he went back to the living room the doctor had returned and was bending over a body on the floor near the fireplace that he hadn't noticed when he had passed through the room a moment ago. The doctor heard him and looked up. His wrinkled face and scrawny neck seemed to personify disapproval.

"See here!" he commanded. "What's going on here? I no sooner get one stiff into the car than I come back and find another one waiting for me. Why?"

He scrambled to his feet and stalked over to Baker like a bantam rooster. Baker tried to go around him, but the little dried-up fellow quickly blocked him. Baker looked down into the wizened doctor's eyes.

"Think it over for a while," he invited. "Maybe you'll come to the conclusion that they died."

"I think they were poisoned, and in my capacity as coroner I intend to hold post-mortems. I'm gonna warn the sheriff to keep an eye on you to see that you don't try to pull a sneak."

"O. K., go to it," Baker agreed. "But if you'll wait a while, we'll go to town with you."

The little doctor peered at him intently, then turned away to maneuver the additional body out to his car. It was characteristic of his insolent independence that he asked no help of anyone.

BAKER watched him lift Elaine in his skinny arms and go out the door. Then his hand closed over the pistol in his pocket. He started forward again, then halted when Peggy came to meet him.

She was quieter, more self-composed. She smiled up at him wanly.

"Well?" she asked.

He pulled the pistol from his pocket. She looked at it curiously.

He waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

"That ought to take care of it," he offered grimly.

She hesitated, still staring at the pistol. "But it's so small," she objected at last.

"It'll blow her insides right out her back. That is, if it has any insides," he amended doubtfully. "We've never seen it as it really is, and I'm glad we haven't. We see only what we want to see—our ideal!" Then he grinned. "And you don't see me, do you? I ought to take you to court for that. It's incompatibility. Any judge would agree."

He waited for the answering smile he was trying to arouse, but none came.

"But, don't you think you ought to make sure?" she asked, seriously. "If you don't kill her, she'll follow us. Why don't you use fire? Fire is clean, and hot."

He considered. "By God, Peggy! That's a good idea! There are some five-gallon tins of gasoline in the garage. I'll get one. You keep an eye on that cocky little doctor while I go out the side door and bring one back."

He shoved the gun back into his pocket and ran to the garage. Then returned at a slower pace with a five-gallon can of the inflammable fluid under his arm. At the door he halted, listening. He could hear nothing, so he went in.

Peggy was at the front window, watching the doctor.

"O. K.?" he asked.

She nodded and stayed at the window while he went to the kitchen for a can opener. It took a few minutes to cut the top away and expose the liquid. He looked up, anxious about the doctor.

Peggy was looking at him, and she nodded reassuringly. He looked back at the gasoline and at his arms where it had slopped.

"Peggy!" he called. "You'll have to help. Do you think you can?"

She came to him immediately, and he felt a surge of admiration for her courage. Then he outlined his plan:

"I can't touch it off because I got it all over me. I'll carry it to the door and set it on the floor. You carry a lighted candle and stay a couple of feet away from me. I'll swing the door open and take a couple of shots at it for luck, then I'll kick the gasoline over so it'll go into the room, and jump back out of the way. Then you throw the candle into the room to touch it off."

"All right," Peggy said, and Baker admired her calm determination.

HE LIFTED the can and started down the hall. Again the mists were

swirling around him. The stranger must realize her peril and was trying to kill him before he could injure her. He staggered and the can of gasoline almost slipped from his hands. It splashed over his clothes.

Then he straightened and grasped the can tighter. He had to! He must! That horrible thing must not be turned loose on the world.

He set the can down in front of the door and put his left hand on the knob. In his right he held the pistol. He hoped that the thing hadn't discovered how to open doors. If it had—well, their scheme was wrecked.

He twisted the knob and opened the door, silently. He looked in. It was on the bed. He flung the door open—fired two shots at it.

And he hit it, he knew. For it reared upward in the bed, arched its body stiffly with pain.

Baker leaped back out of the way and the candle flew through the doorway and into the room. There was an explosive puff, then the room was a mass of flames. One scream came from the room and froze him with its anguish.

Then he and Peggy were stumbling down the hall and out of the house. The doctor had just finished his task and was coming toward the door. When he saw them he halted and turned back. Baker knew that he hadn't heard the shots and was glad that the pistol was of small caliber.

Baker stood at the side of the car, looking back at the house. Flames were beginning to flicker at the windows. He was eager to get going.

"Come on, come on. Let's go!" he said impatiently.

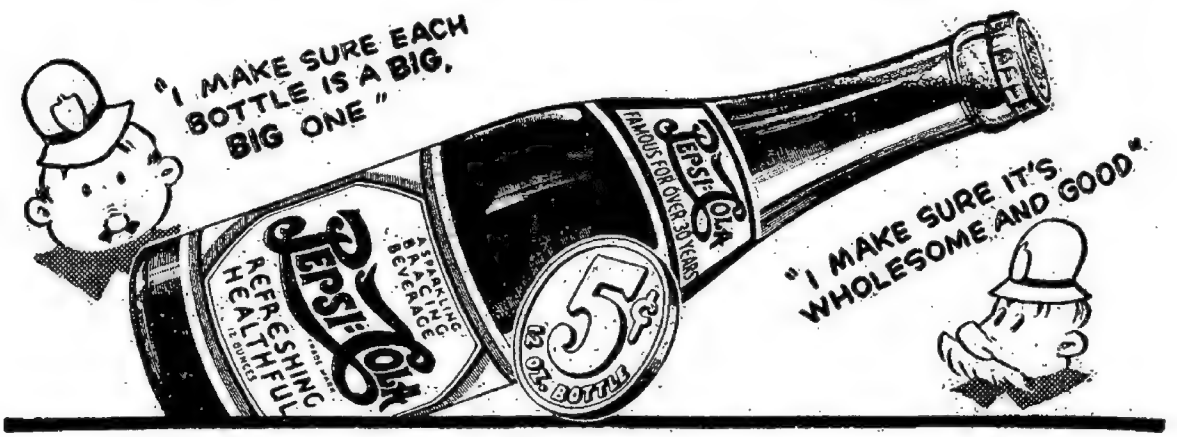
"Keep your shirt on," the wizened doctor advised. "Is your wife staying here? Here, Martha, you sit in the middle. It will be warmer." He slapped the seat beside him.

Baker stared as Peggy got in.

"That will be nice," she said. "Warmer! And I've been so cold."

The pistol was still in Baker's pocket. He wanted to snatch it out and shoot—he willed himself to. But he climbed meekly into the car and sat down. He was enthralled by the stranger.

His face was serene—expressionless. But inside was a boiling mess of fear, hate, and grief. He knew now that he had been deluded into opening the wrong door.



ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

By J. ALLAN DUNN

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The psychology of the Olympian gods and their friends was just a bit hard on a modern American!

Illustrated by M. Isip

PART II

Synopsis

Peter Brent, American with a wandering foot, wandered away from an old shrine, ruined and broken down, in modern Greece. But he wandered through a curious laurel hedge—into Greece of three thousand years ago, into a Greece where the gods of ancient Greece still ruled! Pan he met first—and Pan took a liking to Peter Brent, who had considerable of the happy-go-lucky easiness of Pan in himself.

But, being in the land of Zeus, Peter—now Petros—has to take on the local customs, which include running errands for Zeus. The one Zeus assigns isn't nice. He has to get a certain very strange and very wonderful jewel now in the possession of Python, and, while he's about it, rescue Ephryne, one of the daughters of a goddess, whom Python is holding as a hostage. Python likes oxen for dinner, normally—whole, three or four at a time. But it's up to Petros to find out how to get past the monster.

First, though, is the problem of finding him. Petros now begins to learn the old Greek game of "I will if you will." Pan tells him Cheiron either knows or can find out for him, but Cheiron, chief of the centaurs, will want something in return. Pan personally isn't popular with Cheiron and the centaurs, having caused Cheiron considerable trouble in one way or another, but, being friendly toward Petros, gives him a salve that, he says, will soothe the centaur's tender hoofs. Peter succeeds in meeting some of the centaurs, who take him to Cheiron. Things seem straight enough—only there's a lingering suspicion in Petros' mind that Pan's hoof-salve may be far from soothing, in fact. Pan's sense of responsibility is small, and he loves a good joke—

V.

CHEIRON, chief of all the centaurs, reclined on a deep bed of oaten straw. There was a table in front of him that gave off odors of hot meat and other viands that flooded Peter's mouth with the flow of his salivaries.

Cheiron rose, forefeet first. He had a noble face, a long Greek nose that flowed into his fine brow, wide and lofty. It was furrowed with the lines of thought and of age. There were wrinkles about his eyes, lines from nose to mouth half hidden by gray mustachios and a sweeping beard, well tended, parted in two big curls. He was partly bald, but at the back his hair hung thickly to his shoulders.

His eyes were lustrous and they surveyed Peter with a glance that at once embraced and probed him. Wisdom sat on that forehead.

The fire in the entry was dupli-

cated here. Its light threw dancing shadows everywhere. Cheiron's own shadow was huge upon the back wall of the cavern. Peter's—if he had yet regained one—was blent with the others.

Stalactites hung from the vaulted ceiling, sparkling with silica. Stalagmites rose in pillars to meet them. The place had a strange beauty. Beside the table were stone seats and carved wooden ones. On the table a covered dish, ewers, bowls of fruit and one of oaten cakes.

"Be seated, Petros, you must be weary. You are most welcome."

The voice of Cheiron was like the vox humana notes of an organ—deeply melodious. Beside those of Pyloetius they had great refinement. "First we will drink, then eat, and then you shall tell me your mission."

He poured a goblet of violet-hued wine, with a heady perfume, the taste of grapes and a still headier effect. Peter's grateful stomach glowed in comfort. The quality of the vintage stole through his veins. The stalactites seemed to sway a little like some vast swinging chandelier. Cheiron's benign visage showed like a genial sun in a dissolving mist.

Then things steadied, and Peter suddenly felt at his ease as Cheiron heaped a platter with hot meat. Cheiron told him it was kid, and Peter wondered if he had served kid to Pan.

Cheiron had a hearty appetite. His table manners were more efficient than elegant. There were knives, but he used his fingers, for the tender kid meat fell apart. There were savory spices in it, and gravy. Cheiron mopped oaten cakes in this, and gobbled. His fine nose took on color and now Peter saw broken veins in it, and in his cheeks.

When Cheiron ate, he ate, and he was no sluggard with the goblet. His beard got stained with wine and arded with fat and gravy. He would need grooming, Peter considered, but his hospitality seemed to swell with his belly, as he urged Peter to more and more. They topped off the meal with ripe figs and peaches. Peter was replete and fortified. No doubt the wine helped to make him bold.

It might loosen his tongue, he realized. He must not mention Pan. And it might be well to acknowledge himself a mortal.

"I am not a god, O Cheiron," he said. "But I am upon a task set me by Zeus. It was told me that, if I could gain the counsel of Cheiron, teacher of Heracles, of Jason and many young nobles, my task would be greatly lightened. Not that I am even noble, for we have none in my own land, where all are born equal."

"How long do they last that way, after they grow up," asked Cheiron shrewdly. "The idea is good but the wise—and the crafty—will ever rule the rest. What is this, my son?"

Peter produced the salve for sore frogs, explained its virtues. Cheiron accepted it, smelled it, set it down.

"It should be useful. It will take time to prove it. What may I do in exchange for this gift, and for the service you have rendered my people, whose feet are swift, but whose brains are sluggish?"

Peter had a swift and most unpleasant thought. He was glad that Cheiron did not possess Pan's ability to read his mind. Though the centaur was shrewd enough to guess some of it. But not this time, Peter trusted.

Pan was a prankish god. He had taken a fancy to Peter, but just what did that mean? Suppose Pan had used Peter as a medium, through whom the goat god could get even with Cheiron?

Suppose the frog salve, instead of soothing, should turn out to be an irritant to those hoofs, that had been the crux of the misunderstanding between Pan and Cheiron.

It was too late now, Peter told himself. He could not ask for the salve back again, give any reason for it without bringing in Pan. And Pan, with whom Peter felt a real affinity, might be perfectly on the level with him. Mentally, Peter shrugged his shoulders.

This was just another matter on the knees of the gods, this time in the shaggy lap of Pan.

He was more inclined to trust Pan than Cheiron. Cheiron was no god. Part horse, part human. A freak of nature, a jest of the gods. But Peter felt he could handle Cheiron. He could string him along. He was a good judge of his fellowmen. The old centaur seemed friendly enough, but he was not yet ready to grant favors too freely. The salve had yet to be tested. After all, it was not a great gift. He wanted to put Cheiron under an obligation that was worth while. To trade with him.

"Before I talk about myself," Peter said, "I've got an idea to set before you. I noticed that the feet of your people have been worn on the rocks, their beauty has been marred—especially in their battle with the Lapithae. Now if they were shod not—as I am—with leather, but with metal—"

He saw Cheiron getting the idea, stroking his beard and nodding.

"—such shoes would wear instead of their own horn. They need not be heavy. They could be renewed easily when worn out. Your people would soon grow used to them. In a word—*horseshoes!*"

Peter had abandoned false ideas of modesty. If Cheiron wanted to think he had invented horseshoes, let him do so.

"But how would they be fastened?" asked the centaur. "If with thongs, they would soon chafe through."

"I can show you. Give me paper or parchment, some sort of pencil."

"That is easy." Cheiron reached back and drew from a natural niche, that served him as cupboard, some rolls of parchment. "Herein lies wisdom," he said profoundly. "The wisdom of others from which I draw, and to which I add my own. Here is a blank sheet, here a stylus, with reeds and quills."

THE STYLUS was a clip that held charcoal. Cheiron had a small pot of glossy black ink, made from berries. Peter chose a split quill. He was a fair draftsman and Cheiron watched him with growing interest as he sketched a horseshoe, marked the groove, the holes for nails, drawing also the shape of a nail, explaining it should be made of softer metal, not to split the hoof.

He explained further how a bar of metal might be heated, shaped on an anvil. Cold-shoeing would do, he thought, since burning the natural horn might not appeal to the centaurs, at least at first. Peter had learned, once, how to shoe his own mount. He felt he could do a fair job of it now, if he had the shoes.

"They should, of course, be made of various sizes, kept on hand," he went on, as if he were perfecting details.

"It could be done," Cheiron said slowly. It is a noble plan, one worthy of a god, Petros. But there is only one who could fashion these, if he were willing. That is Hephaestus, the husband of Aphrodite. Charis also is his consort.

"This idea would appeal to him. He is a wondrous craftsman and he

is also a very crafty person, with plenty of devices with which to revenge himself upon those who make fun of his clumsy walk. The palaces and jewels of Olympus are his work. He makes the thunder bolts for Zeus, his father. He made the net in which he snared Ares when he tried to make love to Aphrodite, and so turned the laugh upon Ares. Once he fashioned an iron throne for Hera, his own mother—and lo, she could not rise from it until he freed her.

"He delights to get the gods drunk on nectar. Once he gave some to me"—Cheiron half closed his eyes, as if recalling some incident not displeasing. "He drinks deeply himself, and he has a terrible temper. He tempers metal but he may not control his own, or does not care to. A powerful being, Petros, but like that vagrant rascal, Pan, Hephaestus is mischievous. I bid you beware of Pan, Petros. Have naught to do with him. He respects none and nothing."

"I'll bear that in mind," Peter said gravely. He saw the trail he must follow branching off, in the way that the paths of the gods forked and doubled. They gave you a task to do, and never told you that it would prove twice or thrice as complicated as it seemed at first.

It was perfectly plain to Peter that Cheiron meant him to visit the testy and tricky Hephaestus. The centaur took it for granted.

"His smithy is in the heart of a burning mountain beyond the sea, Petros. "It is there you must seek him, surrounded by the man-eating, one-eyed Cyclopes, who are his helpers. I think he would make the shoes, Petros, if you once got to talk with him. You have the gift of speech, Petros. Above all, if you could think of something that would be a fitting gift for him."

IF? Another of those infernal IFS that kept cropping up like stumbling blocks. The man-eating, one-eyed Cyclopes did not sound so good. Odysseus, Peter remembered, had been made captive by one of them, Polyphemus, who meant to devour the adventurer and all his crew. Odysseus, a wily and resourceful chap, had bested Polyphemus by thrusting a burning pole into his solitary eye, while the giant was asleep.

There Odysseus had played in luck. Oh, well—

He finished his goblet of wine and Cheiron refilled it. He had guessed what Peter was thinking about.

"Your wits must pass you by the Cyclopes, Petros. They are hideous and strangely monstrous, cruel and bloody of nature, and horrific to behold with their frightful mouths, their hairy bodies and their huge eyes flaming in the center of their foreheads."

Peter wondered for a second, if Cheiron was getting a kick out of trying to scare him. Probably not; Cheiron wanted those shoes. The old boy was kindly enough. He might be cagy about Peter's proffered gifts, as others were warned to be of Greeks presenting them. And the learned Cheiron was beginning to show a more vulgar side. He loved his dignity and his wisdom, he was an egoist—as all gods seemed to be. And he was getting slowly, but surely drunk, though he was still shrewd, perhaps with wits sharpened in some ways by the liquor, with caution predominant. He belched in almost prideful complacency.

"About the task?" he said.

Peter decided not to tell all that he had been asked to do. He might well be allowed to appear more or less mysterious as a messenger of

The centaurs displayed a lust for battle that Peter, definitely, could not share—

Zeus, even though appointed willy-nilly.

"I have to seek out Python," he said. "It is said he is in hiding because of Apollo and Artemis, who seek his life."

"I see. I see. Zeus sends you to Python. For what? Nay, do not tell me. To say little, listen much, and see widely, proclaims him who possesses wisdom. But I may wonder. I have heard of a magic jewel, of a maiden held, perhaps as pledge against the fury of Artemis and her brother. I will make a bargain with you, Petros—"

He hiccuped on the word. He could hold his liquor better than Pan, Peter fancied, but he liked it.

"—persuade Hephaestus to make those shoes, Petros, and I will tell you how to find Python."

"How shall I reach Hephaestus, across the sea, O Cheiron?"

"Sleep, and the night, bring counsel, Petros." Cheiron yawned, finished his chalice. "In the morning I will tell you. Poseidon may help us. Is he not known as Hippios, did he not create the first horse? Is he not our guardian tutelary? We shall see. As for Hephaestus, you must call upon your own genius, Petros. One does favors *for* him, rather than ask them. There is one thing in *your* favor, if you win through to him. Your hair. It glows like the iron he takes from his fire and hammers on his anvil. He is god of fire, even as Poseidon is god of water. And he may take your hair as a sign."

Peter ran a hand through his crisp thatch. It was inclined to be curly, and at school and college, he had inevitably been dubbed "Red." He hoped it would prove an asset.

Cheiron yawned again.

"I am ready for sleep, Petros. There is fresh straw in a rock chamber near the entry. Spread it for yourself. Sleep well. Inspiration comes through the Gate of Horn, whispering to mortals who are locked in the embrace of Morpheus. I wish you well, Petros, for you have intrigued me with the idea of those horseshoes."

Cheiron, Peter mused, as he went to make up his bed, was more genial than generous. He did not believe in bestowing something for nothing, and the frog salve was not enough. Moreover, he put it up to the mortal to deliver.

PETER was prepared not to sleep, with the Cyclopes on his mind, and then Hephaestus. He might beguile the fire god, though he did not see how, but the one-eyed anthropophagi listened neither to rhyme nor reason. But he was tired, he had a full belly after hunger, and a skin pretty well filled with wine. He curled up in the straw and knew nothing more, sleeping dreamlessly until the sun shot a golden shaft fairly into the cave at dawn.

He had a slight hangover. Cheiron's wine was new and powerful. It was never given time to age, he supposed, and there was too much honey mixed with it, to sweeten it.

The acidity of his stomach craved fruit juices. He walked back to get some from the leavings on the table.

He wondered that Cheiron's snortings had let him sleep at all. The centaur lay upon his side, six-limbed. His legs were stretched out in limber ease, one arm was his pillow and he was automatically scratching his ribs with one hand. In the soft light of dawn, for the sunlight did not reach the back of the cavern, he looked benignant but somewhat bawdy.

Peter took the fruit and went out-

side the cave to the ledge that fronted it, gazing over the wild landscape. He could not see Olympus from there, and he did not want to. He was fed up with Olympus, but he was not rash enough to make a third attempt at breaking through the invisible mesh that had been cast about him, like a spell. The memory of the flaming bolt, the plutonic stench in his nostrils, the sight of the incinerated cedar, was too keen.

He saw nothing of the centaur troop. The vale below the ledge was empty.

The fruit helped, but the craving for a cigarette again attacked him. He leaned his aching head on his hands and thought he felt his parietal plates pulsing.

There came a hail from the valley. Two young centaurs had trotted into sight. They seemed to know all about him.

He saw their shadows strewn wide on the turf, and thought of his own. It was coming back, barely visible now, just a mere film, barely to be distinguished, almost an illusion. The ambrosial aura was wearing thin and mortality would prevail again.

"Does Cheiron wake?" asked one of the centaurs. Peter saw that they bore between them ewers, lengths of white cloth and an amphora that was stoppered, which he guessed held liquor for Cheiron's morning's-morning. He hoped the ewers held water, and that he could get the loan of a towel.

He was still filthy from the fight, sweat had dried into the grime of travel. He heard Cheiron rising, roused by the voice.

Peter decided he was a bit low, and that a snifter from the amphora might restore his morale.

Cheiron's voice came booming.

"Come up, Dolon! Come up Atocles! I will join thee, Petros, when I have made my toilet. Then you can lave."

Cheiron's valets came trotting up, past Petros into the interior of the cave. Presently one of them came back, knelt, for all the world like a trick horse in a circus, Peter thought, and handed him a shallow chalice filled with golden liquor.

"It is not nectar, O Petros. But perhaps it will serve. My name is Atocles."

The liquor served. It smelled like Napoleon brandy. It tasted like it. It coursed through his system with a tingling warmth that pepped Peter up amazingly. He felt tops.

Dolon came with a basin and a towel. He produced an ivory tool with which Peter cleaned his nails, after he had washed up. There was no soap and Peter was a bit ashamed of the dirty towel, but he felt more presentable.

He stayed where he was until Cheiron appeared. The centaur's beard had been cleaned and curled, he was well groomed, faintly redolent of brandy.

"While the cave is being cleaned and breakfast provided, let us take a stroll, Petros," he said good-humoredly. He led the way to a high peak above the cavern. The sun was behind them. Far to the westward stretched the Ionian sea, looking like dark-blue, watered-silk, faintly heaving.

"There lies the forge of Hephaestus," said Cheiron.

There was no land in sight. Peter knew that three hundred miles distant was the toe of Italy, the Straits of Messina between it and Sicily, where Mt. Etna nursed its eternal fires.

And there, in this realm, this dimension into which he had projected himself, Hephaestus lorded it over the Cyclopes—himself the father of

one of them—sooty, sweaty monsters, laboring night and day in his smithy, torn with cannibal appetites, rebellious against their forced labor, yet fearful of the fire god's anger.

SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED TO TIME!

It was as if some Supreme Hand shifted an hourglass, so that the grains that ran one way now flowed another. Peter was engulfed in some sort of cosmic maelstrom.

"I will have Pyloetius bear you to a place where you may meet Poseidon," Cheiron said. "Also I will give you a scroll. I think that when he reads it he will arrange for you to reach Hephaestus. When you return with the horseshoes I will keep my promise. Now, let us return to the cave. You must be hungry."

VI.

The Temple of Poseidon was in a little vale that opened to the sea. It was too long a journey for the aging Cheiron to attempt, even if he considered the occasion one of sufficient importance for him to make the effort.

Pyloetius and Peter took two days for the trip. Peter's shadow had been restored but Pyloetius made no comment. He might have thought Petros was disguising himself as a mortal—since a god might be able to project a shadow at will, where a mortal might not get rid of one.

Peter had Cheiron's scroll, and a young horse colt went with them, willingly enough, unconscious of its fate. It was intended as a sacrificial offering to the sea god. Peter thought the choice cruel, coming from Cheiron—himself half-horse, at least in body.

He saw the temple at dawn, a massive structure of Doric architecture. The sun flushed the great columns and the decorated podium with rose. The shadows were violet, the whole structure seemed ethereal despite its solidity.

The main building was reached by steps within wing-walls on either side the podium. There were no other worshipers as Peter, bearing the scroll, mounted, with Pyloetius going nimbly beside him.

Peter gathered that, between Poseidon and Hephaestus, there might be a bond because Polyphemus, who had been outwitted and slain by Odysseus, was a son of Poseidon, and so allied to the Cyclopes who served the god of fire. The scroll set that forth, and introduced Peter—Petros—to Poseidon as a messenger of Zeus, who was a guest of Cheiron, presenting to Hephaestus an idea Cheiron hoped would be approved by him. The favor was to Cheiron, vouching for Petros, beseeching the ear of the Mighty Forger.

Peter wondered if the approach might be better on the distaff side, through Pan and Amphitrite. But Pan was absent.

Pyloetius thought that Poseidon would furnish transportation in the shape of a chariot drawn by dolphins, that would attend Peter while Hephaestus made the shoes. Cheiron had no doubt of the successful issue of the errand, and Peter tried to bolster himself with the centaur's faith. But he still did not enjoy the idea of the Cyclopes.

The colt was on a lead noosed about its lower jaw. The steps bothered and excited it. Halfway up, it left droppings and Pyloetius shook his head.

"It is an ill omen to foul the steps of the temple," he said solemnly. "But we may not go back, for our approach is noted."

As he spoke a gong clanged brazenly within the temple. Bronze gates slid apart automatically, with the muffled sound of rushing water. A deep voice chanted rather than spoke:

"Who seeks the shrine of Poseidon?"

Pyloetius knelt on his forelegs. Peter made due obeisance as a sense of awe and mystery invaded him. The colt whinnied.

"From Cheiron I come, escort to a messenger from Zeus, who bears a scroll setting forth his desire, bringing also a sacrifice."

The temple was dimly lighted. Peter's shadow was not in evidence. In the rear of the vast building, whose ceiling was upheld by a double tier of columns, he saw a fire rise and fall upon an altar, viewed through a lattice of marble.

A temple attendant came and led away the colt. He motioned to Peter to come with him, held Pyloetius back with uplifted palm and a gesture of dismissal.

Peter followed. A second attendant appeared and showed him into a chamber behind the altar that, he saw as he passed it, was upheld by dolphins at the corners, with bulls and horses sculptured on its front.

THE CHAMBER was deserted. It held no furnishings save a great chair, or throne, cunningly fashioned in the shape of a fluted shell.

Peter was left alone. Time passed —he *supposed* time passed. There were things in this godland hard to assimilate, to comprehend, like problems in high mathematics. And there were occasions that might be classed as ungodly. He was well into the web. What he had to do was to keep a stiff upper lip, not to cross bridges before he came to them, not to burn them too readily behind him. Above everything, not to let fear weaken him.

There was no good worrying about anything in advance. There might be nothing to worry about when it came to it, and if there were, worry would not do him any good.

But there was something about this vast, silent, lonely chamber, with its empty throne, that was psychic —that broke down logic and reasoning. Peter fought off fear at arm's length. If a chap panicked he was sunk, no doubt of that.

The stone courses next to the high ceiling were broken by latticed transoms. Now the sound of chanting filtered through from the main fane:

"Eternal Mystery of Fate!
The vibrant silence trembles
And with awe, the craven hearts of men
Stand still 'twixt fear and hope.
Poseidon, Hear!"

A priest and his chorus—

"The mortals quake before the Unseen Presence;
Poseidon, at whose brief nod, the destinies of men,
May sink in misery or, glorious, rise in triumph.
Poseidon, Hear!"

Poseidon lorded it over his own domain pretty well, Peter thought. Zeus was the supreme Head of the Pantheon, but he probably did not interfere with the god of the sea.

The chant went on, rising and falling in rich cadence. Peter imagined it had a great effect on the suppliants for favor, fishermen, sailors, prone to superstition.

"By Will divine the shuttle weaves its web;
By Will divine the shears their angles close;
So mortals die as falls the severed thread.

And, secret as the future of their days,
The moment of their lives so close at hand.
Poseidon, Hear!
All Hail!
All Hail!"

It was an efficient ritual, compelling enough, but Peter ceased to listen. He felt some sort of psychic pressure. The chamber seemed being charged with something, a Presence, as yet invisible, holding him in keen regard.

Then he heard a soft sigh. The sweat trickled in his armpits as a greenish glow, nebulous, gradually assuming form, began to manifest itself, to *assemble* at the throne.

It was an eerie business. Ancient atavistic terror crawled upon him, ghost hairs lifted on his shoulders. It was the manifestation of the Unknown—Magic which is made up of ignorance.

A voice, soft and sweet and deep as the chime of a silver gong, murmured:

"Be not afraid, ye who seek a favor of Poseidon. He is not present, for he has gone to avenge insult upon the daughters of Erectheus, to rebuke the slight offered in naming the city of Athens after the presumptuous Pallas, rather than Poseidon. He would be in no gracious mood to grant thy plea. But I, Amphitrite, his consort and queen, am pleased to receive thee. Draw closer, thou whose locks are like a flame upon an altar. Speak freely."

Peter wished Pan had not run out on him. There was a disturbing quality about Amphitrite, an allure that was potently feminine, sirenic, of which his every instinct bade him beware.

PETER was in a jam, getting more involved every moment. He dared not offend the goddess, who might turn him into some sort of poor fish at will. He had to cajole her, this sea nymph who was the wife of Poseidon. She had a charm about her and a cajolery all her own, hard for a mere mortal to resist.

He was amusing her, for the moment, but he had a nasty feeling that her mood might not be constant—and if it were, might be hard to reciprocate with the proper balance of acquiescence and reserve.

She had bade him sit at her feet on the pedestal of the throne. His hair seemed to fascinate her. She ran her fingers through it, ruffling it, stroked his brow with lingering, tingling touch that at once soothed and stirred.

So might one stroke the fur of a new pet, Peter told himself. In self-defense, he went into the details of his mission, and now she commiserated him on the dangers ahead.

"Poor boy," she said. "Forget this quest. Zeus may reward greatly, but he will not forgive failure. Do not forget how he slew Apollo's son, Phaethon with a blasting thunderbolt, when he failed to control the sun chariot. Already he has warned you. But I can place you where even Zeus may not reach you, in our golden palace under the sea. I will protect thee. When Poseidon returns, he shall place you beneath the aegis of his own power. I can do anything with Poseidon. And, while he is away, I am lonely, Petros."

She had promised nothing about helping him to reach Hephaestus, only dwelling on the perils of the trip, the uncertain temper of the god, the horror of the Cyclopes.

"You will never return, Petros. Alas, that so bright and fiery a youth should be quenched too soon—"

Peter was confronted by the horns of a dilemma. If he admitted to Amphitrite that he was only a mortal

whose human lungs could suffer no such sea change as a visit to Poseidon's palace under the waves, she would be liable to rise in wrath and majesty because he had deceived her had permitted her to be familiar with him. He could imagine himself changed into a creeping crab. If he kept quiet about it—

She was divinely beautiful, there was no doubt about that. Her diaphanous costume enhanced the grace of her body. She gave out an aura that had something of the effect of ambrosia upon his senses—a sweet sea savor.

Her compelling eyes were green as the heart of a curving wave with the sun shining through. They hinted at dangerous, if delightful, depths. Peter thought of sirens, of how Odysseus had bound himself to the mast to resist their song, knowing that to give way meant destruction.

Her hair was the hue of purple-brown seaweed, softer than spun silk. It fell to her girdle, and beyond, making a veiled tent about herself and Peter.

It was not a fair deal, he told himself. The gods had their own especial weapons of glamour and enchantment.

The only one who could get him out of this situation was Pan, who was probably wooing his latest fancy, Pytis, the pine-tree dryad. Pan had boasted his ability to cope with Amphitrite, Pan had—

Pan had said to think—and *think*—and THINK—when you desired anything badly. There was nothing Peter wanted more just now than the presence of Pan, as chaperon, or better still, to take Amphitrite off his hands.

He discarded all suggestion that Pan had deserted him, he summoned up his will—

Pan! Pan! Pan! Pan! Pan!

Peter was *sending*, a plea vibrating on the ether, praying that Pan would tune in. If he did not—

The hand of Amphitrite crept about his neck.

PAN! PAN! PAN! PAN! PAN!

If Pan was his friend, if there were any affinity between them, he would hear—and surely come.

"You are distraught, Petros," said the goddess. "Perhaps I do not appeal to you—"

Peter stalled nobly while his will emitted his message.

"Your beauty and your majesty are hard to sustain, O Queen."

There had been a subtle sharpness in the quality of her voice. A bell that chimed might also toll.

PAN! PAN! MIGHTY PAN! *PETER CALLING, PAN!*

There came a strain of music, a lilt of notes that issued like airy bubbles charged with music. They broke in magic melody—far away, but coming closer. To Peter it was like an angels' serenade.

"Oh, the days of the Kerry dancin'
Oh, the croon o' the piper's tune;
Oh, the sheen o' the bright eyes,
glancin'—"

Pan's tune. The tune of Syrinx.

Peter felt the hand of Amphitrite stray away.

He heard a throaty, amused chuckle.

PAN, by all the gods! Pan, leaning against the portal. A hoof clicked as he crossed his hairy legs, his yellow eyes bright with a lively malice that was not spiteful, but spiced with a satiric humor as he gazed at Amphitrite, breathed a flourish and put away the syrinx.

"I see you are being kind to my protégé, O Queen of the Sea!" he said.

Peter got up from the pedestal. He felt, thankfully, that he was no longer desired.

"*Your* protégé? He claims to come from Cheiron."

"To whom *I* sent him. Not being able at the time to accompany him hither."

Amphitrite broke into rippling daughter that sounded like the gentle break of waves upon a shell-strewn strand.

"Pan! You have been philandering. And some minx has fooled you. Do not deny it. I know you of old!" She broke again into rippling laughter.

For a moment Pan looked actually sheepish. He winked at Peter.

"You go along, kid. I will amuse the lady."

"Kid" seemed pretty modern for Pan, until Peter realized that it was a natural enough form of address for a goat god to a junior.

"Wait outside, Peter. I'll try and arrange what you came for."

Peter went, gladly. He heard the click of Pan's hoofs across the marble floor as he went down the passage, through the deserted cella to the front stoa.

He saw nothing of Pyloetius, and imagined him trotting back to report to Cheiron.

The hours passed, the shadows shifted on the columned porch. Peter saw many worshipers come to the temple, bearing various offerings, most of them libations of some sort. He had eaten a good breakfast, but he was getting hungry again when Pan at length came out, looking smug.

"It is arranged, Peter," he said. "Amphitrite will appear to some master of a trading vessel seeking a boon at the Temple, who will bear thee to Sicily, and wait for your return—"

Peter thought there was a doubt in Pan's eyes as to that return, but he had spent the hours of waiting in making himself once more the captain of his soul, and he nodded:

"I'll come back all right, Pan."

"Good kid. Amphitrite told me of your idea about the shoes. Hepheastus will approve of that. He will probably want the credit for it."

"That's O. K. with me. It was great of you to show up, Pan."

"I've been keeping you in mind, Peter. I found that Pitys had despaired of my coming. I have another in my eye who far outshines her. This one is named Echo. She is shy but desirable. She answers when I call but she is hard to find. Which makes it all the more interesting. Amphitrite seemed to have been practicing on you when I arrived. She likes to keep her hand in. A trifle difficult at times, like all nymphs. And now let us go to a shepherd I know. He makes good wine and he will feed you."

"I could use something to eat," Peter said.

"The captain of the ship will seek us there, later. I would have taken you to visit with another friend, Midas, King of Phrygia, a rare judge of music. He judged me the victor when I completed with my syrinx against Apollo and his lute, and Apollo was so jealous that he turned poor Midas' ears into those of an ass, so that now he keeps to himself. But we'll have a nice time with Epenor. I shall give you another lap of nectar, and an ambrosial rub, before you go.

"I would not mention Amphitrite to Hephaestus, Peter. It seems that there has been some sort of a leak whereby the sea entered the forge, and Hephaestus believes Poseidon did it on purpose. Amphitrite mentioned it to me, but I doubt if she would have done so to you. She had no idea of letting you go to Sicily, Peter. She meant to detain you for her own diversion. I provided that. I did not undeceive her about your divinity. Come, let us go and find Epenor. It is not too far."

PETER retained only vague memories of the visit with Epenor. The food was good, as Pan had promised, but the wine was better. Peter knew that he suddenly found himself only hazily conscious of his surroundings.

It seemed to him that Pan piped, while goat-footed satyrs danced with maenads and bacchantes in a saturnalia that left him dizzy.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on soft skins in the stern of a

thirty-oared trading galley, that was being propelled both by the efforts of the rowers and the great square-sail of striped fabric that hung from a great yard, and was sheeted home far aft.

The forepeak of the galley was raised from the waist of the vessel, and in it was stowed much of the cargo. Aft, below where Peter reclined drowsily, was a lazarette for the rest of the cargo. An awning had been stretched above Peter's head to shut off the sun.

There were no provisions for shelter of crew or passengers. In that clime it was not often necessary, though Peter knew that violent and sudden storms often ruffled the sea, that now seethed gently in running hollows blue as molten sapphire.

The rowers were stripped to the waist; brawny Ionians. Back of Peter was the helmsman and skipper-owner, a bearded Phrygian in a red cap, an open vest over his hairy chest, and wide pantaloons. There were gold rings in his ears. He had a hooked nose and crafty eyes, and Peter thought him an admirable model for the portrait of a pirate—if, indeed, he were not one.

It was evident that he regarded Peter with reverence. That might well be due to Amphitrite and to Pan, seeing that Peter was traveling under their protection, and that the skipper might expect to acquire good fortune for his providing Peter's passage.

Peter sneaked a look at himself, and shifted to where the sunshine fell in a splash between the two sections of his awning, swinging apart as the galley rose to the surge. The ambrosia was working. He cast no shadows. They considered him divine, and they, themselves, favored by his presence.

"I am Tiphys, and thy servant," said the captain. "Will my lord eat and drink?"

Peter would, and stayed his hunger with oaten cakes, wine and fruit. Later, Tiphys said, there would be a more substantial repast. Peter saw the cooking stone on which, in a ring of dirt, a fire was made and the cook functioned.

The skipper had little to say. He was a rude type and in awe of Peter and his red hair, that Peter caught him admiring. The wind was light but fair. The rowers chanted as they swung at the long oars. Peter got out his whistle and played to them.

In the afternoon the breeze died down, the sea lost its blue clarity and sparkle, and seemed to labor, dull-green under a gray sky. The birds that had been escorting them flew off with petulant cries. There had been no sight of land since they dropped the coast, from which they had sailed, below the horizon.

Now they seemed remote from the world. A light drizzle started, became heavier and lighter in turns until sundown, when it cleared and a golden sunset showed through purple bars in the west, beyond their unseen goal, Sicilia.

The cook arranged sticks and wood. The skipper left the helm to his mate and went into the waist with the intention of lighting the fire, laboring with flint and steel, but having trouble in starting it. The twigs were damp and only smoldered as Tiphys tried to blow them into flame.

Peter joined him. He brought out his pocket lighter, spun the friction wheel with a flip of thumb and forefinger, puffed softly on the braided fuse, and soon had fire licking and crackling amid the fuel.

It was no miracle. Peter had not purposely made any hocus-pocus out of it. The principle was the same

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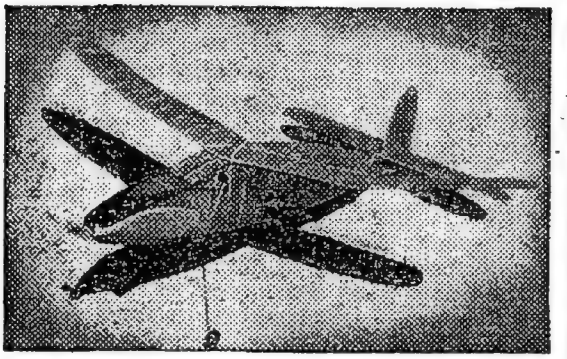

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they used. But to them his deft movements made it seem that he carried a living flame in the little cylinder of perforated metal, and it confirmed his godhood.

THERE WAS broiled meat, with it more wine and fruit and oaten cakes. Simple, satisfying fare. The sky was clear and the stars pricked through, the wind blew gently and the night was warm. Peter piped a little, very softly, and slept long. The rowers curled up on and about their thwarts, the big sail drew steadily.

The next morning there were dolphins somersaulting and caracoling, their sides blue and silver in the pulsing, flushing dawn. The men pointed them out to each other with grins of approval.

They were a visible sign of the patronage of Poseïdon, or of Amphitrite, his wife. Only the patron seemed disturbed and puzzled. He scratched his curly head, wetted a finger and held it to catch the breeze, and found none. He tossed scraps overside and watched their slow progress aft. He ran an anxious eye about the horizon. There was sight of neither sail nor bird. The rim of the sea was a circle, a ring of deep-purple. Clouds were piling up in an argosy southward.

Peter did not consider himself a sailor, but he was tolerably weather-wise and knew the working of a fore-and-aft rig. He fancied the square sail clumsy. It was too big to handle easily, it furled clumsily and the big yard was hard to shift and brace. The galley was slow to come about, little good at sailing close-hauled.

Now it hung flaccid, useless. He noted that the flotsam the captain tossed over to port, as they were headed in the sunpath, west, came against the side, and he fancied there was more than mere attraction to it. A glance to starboard confirmed the

idea that a current was setting them north.

In the night he had twice seen the helmsman using a light by which to inspect a bowl, in which floated a scrap of wood that bore in turn a short, thin needle that had been magnetized by a lodestone. It pointed crudely north and south. A twenty-five-cent compass was as much its superior as an electric bulb is to a sulphur match. It was a forcible reminder to Peter that he was off his own course, astray on the sea of time.

These sailors were the equivalent of what the folks of Maine called apple-orchard mariners. They seldom were far from land, unless blown there. They made costal voyages, relying more upon oars than canvas, often guided by beacons. This trip across the Ionian Sea was quite an undertaking. It might be made in two days with great good fortune, it was more likely to take a week.

Africa was far, far to the south, to the north lay the boot of Italy and the Adriatic. Behind them Greece, ahead Sicilia, or so it *should* lie.

"I do not understand it," said Tiphys, shaking his head. "I have never seen the current set this way before. It looks as if the evil daughter of Phorcys, the sea god, ever jealous of Poseidon's dominion, seeks to bear us to where she can reach from her rock and pluck us from the boat as we avoid the whirlpool of Charbydis. Scylla, I mean, the six-headed monstress. As she did with Odysseus.. Six of his men did she seize and devour, one for each horrid mouth."

He looked appealingly at Peter, who shrugged his shoulders. "Poseidon is far away, busy at Athens," he told the skipper. "We must trust in Amphitrite."

They lowered the useless sail and took to their oars, trying to offset the current. The seas ran heavily in gray hills that curled in sullen, foamless crests. The water seemed to lack any aeration, to lose buoyancy. The sky lowered and took on a dull hue. It was like looking up into a leaden dome. Waves slapped against the prow at the port bow with steady insistency, to offset the efforts of the rowers and the helm.

At noon the leaden dome had become a mass of dirty vapors, scudding steadily above them. The visibility was reduced to less than a cable's length, so that they seemed the center of a hemisphere of which the jobbling water was the uneasy floor.

Now and then a wave flung a heavy mass inboard, sousing the oarsmen. Presently two of them were forced to bail almost continually as the galley labored, her timbers creaking. She went sluggishly to the lee of wind and tide, always encompassed by the limit of visibility. Outside that flying veil they heard thunder muttering but no lightning pierced through. It grew cold. The men began to look at Peter as if he were a Jonah. The skipper looked askance at him.

When they essayed a fire for the evening meal, a wave extinguished it three times and they gave up the attempt. Day gave place to night reluctantly, gradually, eerily.

Peter heard Tiphys cursing as he looked at the bowl he tried to hold steady in his hands, as he consulted his floating needle. It had become demagnetized. He rubbed it on his lodestone, his adamant of Arabia, and it did not respond. With an oath he flung the outfit into the sea.

The waves that rose out of the sloshing blackness reared with cold fires streaking their slopes, broke in

blue and green flame. About the middle of the night the galley suddenly shivered from stem to stern, from gunwale to keel, as if she had struck a rock, and then went staggering on.

It was Peter's idea that Etna, somewhere there in the void, unseen, was cutting up, and that its tremors caused a submarine temblor. But he was not going to communicate his notion. That would make it only too plain that the gods were angry and set to defeat his mission. Tiphys might go about, but to return, appeared as risky as to go ahead.

For his own part, Peter was firmly set to see the whole thing through. Granted he was in Godland, enchanted, at least under the control of powers beyond his own, he could see no way out until his task was completed. He was not allowed to step out of whatever dimension he might be in, therefore, the only thing to do was to make the best of it.

Dawn was merely a slow shift from darkness to gray mist. The rowers had taken shifts through the night and they had no spirit in their work.

Tiphys was scowling, half drunk with wine. He looked at Peter, as if trying to make up his mind to see if his curved knife would be of any avail against this passenger, vouched for by Pan and dedicated to his own care by Amphitrite.

Of course, he could not slay a god. And he would have to make accounting to the sea goddess who had appeared to him and laid her commands upon him. The trouble was that Poseidon did not have such absolute dominion over the sea as Zeus did over Olympus, or Pluto-Hades. And it seemed evident to Tiphys that Phorcys was opposed to this voyage. Or Triton, Poseidon's unruly son, might be in league against him. All Poseidon's children were rebellious.

He muttered about this, as if to himself, but plainly it was meant for Peter.

Peter was being thankful he was a good sailor. A seasick deity would be, to say the least, undignified.

"I am a messenger of Great Zeus himself, Tiphys," he said with a calmness he congratulated himself for exhibiting. "Great Zeus will see us safely through."

He supposed that Tiphys had two patron gods, Zeus for land and Poseidon for sea. The skipper said nothing more but continued to mutter in his beard, too low for Peter to know what he said.

The long day wore through, windless, thunderous with seas that ran in liquid pyramids, that tossed them here and there, ever ready to fling them in the troughs, broach and sink them. They ate cold victuals, drank much wine to offset the claminess and chill. The relentless current rammed them ahead of it, or rather sidewise, as they wearily tried to counteract it.

The wind started to blow hard toward nightfall. The seas rose and pitched the open galley about like a chip in a millrace. They shipped water steadily and wrought desperately to keep the boat afloat.

After hours of buffeting, that left them spent, the wind passed, brooming the scud away and showing the stars and a rising half-moon. The sea fire vanished and the waves surged black as jet.

Tiphys gave a cry, pointing. In the southwest there was a ruddy, throbbing glow, high up. The active crater on the shoulder of the volcano cast its lurid glare upon the steamy vapor that hung over it.

"Now, let Zeus save us! Man can do no more," said Tiphys. "We are bound for the strait."

For a moment, the Cyclops stopped, blinded by the beam of the light. Then, ponderously, he moved forward—

That glow should have been on their starboard bow, in the northeast. And now the current no longer buffeted but bore them, swift and strong on either side, as if they rode in a flume.

The wearied, despondent men, sodden without by brine, within by wine, cast themselves down, resigned and exhausted. Tiphys hugged his knees, asquat by the taffrail, after he had lashed his helm.

The red sun rolled up from the sea on their port quarter as they sped. Now landfall was all too clear —the heights of Sicilia, the loom of Italy.

Across the sea there came a faint, sweet chanting. Tiphys shuddered.

"The Siren Sisters," he said hoarsely. "We shall clear *their* shore, but we are doomed."

The bleak precipices of the fateful strait semed to rush toward them while the galley appeared to be towed by undersea creatures.

The roar of boiling waters sounded, deafening them. The gat looked as if it would close in upon them, in a smother of spray and foam.

They neared two streaming crags, no more, Peter thought, than fifty fathoms apart. From one there belched out an eddying whirlpool that threatened to suck them into its fatal eddy. There Charybdis was imprisoned by angry Zeus, spewing her hate, hoping to stay her passion with the bodies of drowned men, crunching their bones to pulp.

On the other dwelled Scylla, changed by jealous Amphitrite to a twelve-footed and six-headed monster, with yelping jaws and rows of gnashing, avid teeth. Amphitrite must have deserted them or her powers were failing. She might even be avenging herself on the recreant Peter, who had fled from her charms.

Peter got to his feet, clinging to a backstay, shouting to make himself heard.

"Zeus deserts only cowards," he roared. "To your oars, shoot through the strait! It is our only chance."

He jumped down among them, booting them, shaking them, inspiring them to a last effort.

"If you must die, die like men," he bellowed, and sprang back to the helm. "Give me a hand with this," he cried to Tiphys.

Out of her cave came Scylla, horrendous, ravening incredible, looking like a gigantic spider, shapeless of body, hairy of legs, her six faces those of hags, each more revolting than the other, reaching out for them through the spume with her skinny arms.

Peter swung the tiller, heading for Charybdis. They had one chance—that the backwash would hold them off. They were caught on the lip of the funneling sea, borne along it, bound to be sucked into the vortex, unless—the gods were with them. A counter eddy swung them—

"Now *row!* Pull, as if the Furies clawed you, my hearties! Pull, damn your salty hides, pull!"

The helm bucked. The blades dug deep. If anybody caught a crab, the crabs would get what Scylla left. Peter and Tiphys viced their grips until their knuckles showed white as chalk, as they set weight and muscle to the long tiller. For fearful moments they hung on the verge of the watery abyss—slowly they drew away.

Scylla howled above the gale, a howl of rage as her dozen bloodshot orbs saw the galley slide in a foaming trough, while the rowers, seeing safety ahead, made the stout ashtocks bend like bows.

"Pull, you bullies, pull!" Peter leaned and moved to the stroke of the oars like the coxswain of a racing eight, hitting up the count-beat.

Through, and clear, they shot. The open sea lay ahead with the blue Lipari Islands dotting it. The strait widened. The sun shone, painting rainbows on the mists, that swiftly shredded away. Sea and sky were blue again, the wind fair and free behind them as they hoisted sail, and sped along the northern coast of the great isle.

They had to circumnavigate it. They could not attempt the strait

again. Hot beams cheered and warmed them. They hailed Peter as their deliverer.

"Truly thou art a messenger of Zeus," said Tiphys, hastening to unseal a wickered jug of wine, pouring a libation into the now friendly waters.

Peter took a good long swig at the wine. Truly, he thought, there were wheels within wheels in Godland. He only hoped he was amusing Zeus, keeping him well disposed toward him, whenever Zeus bothered to think about the plaything he had wound up, like a sidewalk toy on his lap, and set down to do his bidding.

Tiphys had some cargo to deliver at Syracuse but he held straight on past Catania and landed Peter at Aetraete, right at the foot of Etna, so convinced was he that Peter had delivered them from destruction. He did not even notice, nor did his men, that Peter's shadow was returning.

Tiphys promised to be back within the week, to wait another one. "If," he said, "we do not run afoul of pirates." The crew was well armed and lusty, and did not seem to fear that they would not be able to give a good account of themselves to human foes.

Pan had given Peter instructions as to his finding the way to the workshop of Hephaestus. There was one vast split, rent by the volcanic throes, its sides built up by lava flows. It forked toward its end. Peter was to take the right-hand fork, and enter a cavern where it closed.

If—there was ever an *if*—the Cyclopes did not discover him and devour him.

Pan had a twinkle in his yellow eyes when he spoke of the cannibal ogres. Peter imagined that Pan liked to get a rise out of him, but that he believed Peter would win out in the end.

"They are witless folk, Peter, thinking only of their bellies. They cannot see far on either side without turning their heads, and they are not swift in their movements. You must watch the wind, Peter, for they have a keen scent, especially for human flesh.

"As for Hephaestus, he has a jovial side. Zeus guard thee, Peter. I shall be watching for your return. I am making a brief visit with Amphitrite. Echo can wait. She is too elusive, that one, unless one is in the mood for playing hide and seek."

It was a grim trip up the fire-scarred fissure, its sides jagged, blown out by gases, sometimes smooth where lava had spilled down the steep slopes. He walked over lava that was brown and porous, like taffy, looking not unlike enormous cables of pulled candy. It was brittle and the seeming ropes were hollow so that he had to be careful of breaking through. Other lava was in flinty waves of black volcanic glass. He plowed through fields of black ash that turned up sulphur-yellow under foot.

Everywhere masses of obsidian protruded in weird shapes. There was no living thing of plant or animal life. There was no water and the rocks gave off heat that might have been sun-stored or radiant from internal fires.

Every little while the ground trembled, while deep rumblings came from the great mass of the volcano. No sun shone into the gorge. It was veiled by the pall of vapor that hung overhead, or sometimes puffed up, rolling in cauliflower-shaped masses. Steam hissed from fissures. It might

well have been another entry to Hades.

He saw no sign of the Cyclopes, heard none. At last he reached the black mouth of the cavern that led into the interior, where Hephaestus had his smithy and used the fire of Etna in his prodigious labor.

It was a nasty place to enter, and Peter summoned up all his nerve. Zeus would not let him turn aside, therefore, he must go ahead. The idea of an eruption haunted him, but he held on. At first he used his flashlight and found there was a sort of trail that skirted deep abysses where, deep down, he glimpsed erratic flashes of light, that belched fierce heat up to the vaulting roof.

Then, as he advanced deeper into the bowels of the mountain, he passed lateral fissures from which came glares of red light. These he passed swiftly, sweating with the growing heat and nervous tension. Once he saw a cataract of molten rock pouring down into the pit that engulfed it. There were great roarings, blasts of heated air.

The place was a natural tunnel, a conduit through which lava must have flowed, leaving the solid rock, as the liquid stream of mineral passed on, eons ago.

The mighty tube became more solid and he had to use his flash again, sparingly, thankful that the triple batteries were almost new.

It made a sharp curve and suddenly he saw light ahead, heard a tumult of clanging, emerged upon a ledge that faded away to his right, and found himself looking down into a vast chamber where monster figures toiled about fires, pounding at glowing shapes of metal through writhing columns of steam.

It was so vast he barely glimpsed the high roof, the irregular sides. Near the center a pillar of fire rushed upward, whistling as it spouted from the reservoir of natural gas.

The Cyclopes were at work, slaving at their tasks. Now and then he caught the fierce glitter of their solitary orbs as one and another lifted a brawny, glistening arm to wipe away the sweat that dripped from their foreheads, varnished all their huge figures, clad only in short aprons of leather.

At the least pause a harsh voice stormed at them and they swung their hammers, plied their pincers with renewed energy.

Peter did not see the owner of the voice at first. Then steam gusted away and he saw the fire god, limping about a forge where a Cyclopes blew gigantic bellows, while Hephaestus turned a twist of glowing metal cunningly where flame broke through the bed of coal.

For all his lameness, he was amazingly agile. The Cyclopes were giants compared to him, and he was twice the build of Peter, naked except for a girdle of spotted skin below his bibbed apron of leather. His voice, resonant and masterful, had the power to pierce through all the clangor, the whistling whine of the column of ignited gas. It reached everywhere, penetrating as the voice of a speaker transmitted through loud-speakers.

It was a steady stream of invective, ever varying, before which the Cyclopes winced and cowered and smote while sparks flew like shooting-stars.

Hephaestus cursed the Cyclopes wielding the bellows with a fertility of imagination and point that made Peter marvel at the biting wit that was worse than any lash.

In this pandemonium the slaving,

shining figures were painted ruddy where the fires limned them, black in their sooty shadows.

Hephaestus drew the twist of heated metal, placed it in a forge and attacked it with fast, deft blows as he held it on an anvil with his pincers. It kave off sparks like a firework.

Suddenly he flung down his hammer, threw the fiery twist from his pincers at the Cyclopes, who now stood quietly by the bellows with folded arms. The blazing missile struck him on his chest and he howled like a stricken wolf. His fellows turned to look at him.

Hephaestus threw up his arms, dancing jerkily on his mismated legs, reviling them.

"Begone, you misbegotten dolts! Begone, all of you, before I plunge this rod into your short-sighted eyes."

He snatched a rod from the forge and brandished it by one handled end—the other end at white heat.

"Fools! Spoiling more than you make! Am I accursed that I must use such clumsy clods? Begone!"

He seemed to tower in stature above them, his voice boomed and held such godlike purpose that they cowered away like beaten curs, stumbling over each other, over their scattered work, dodging the fires and the flaring pillar of flame, huddling together, their single eyes filmed with shame and fear.

Hephaestus made uneven strides toward them and they bolted into the side of the place, as rabbits bolt into burrows at the foot of a high bank.

The fire god threw aside his rod and burst into laughter that was tossed back and forth in stentorian echoes of mirth.

His wrath had passed like a summer squall. He sat on his anvil and rocked himself, then stooped and hoisted a stone jug into the crook of his elbow, set its neck to his bearded lips.

This was as good a time as any, Peter told himself. Before the humor passed. The bellows-blower seemed to have been faulty, or at least he had been held in blame. The sight of their abject exit had made Hephaestus forget his spoiled metal.

But not all the Cyclopes had gone. As Peter made his way along the ledge that ramped down in zigzags to the floor of the mammoth smithy, a gigantic figure stepped from a natural recess and blocked his path.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank. I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

"—AND HAVING WRIT—"

Continued from page 6

ful enough to put him ahead in science, it is to be expected that they are also strong enough to hold him fast to his unconscious ideals.

No man's mind is broader than his approach to his subject. Hence, in the narrowing of the field so peculiar to the scientific approach, a scientist misses much—as has often been noticed and commented upon by philosophers. I would not criticize astronomers. They are my best friends, though I have no acquaintance in a personal sense with any of them. I'm sure any astronomer with imagination—but no leisure time to use it—would welcome the thrill of learning that astronomically based periodicities matched, either coincidentally or otherwise, with the disappearance of ships at sea. In fact, I should very much like to discuss my work with some astronomer—both he and I would learn much.

I say this because Russell—like his much more capable prototype, Fort—likes to ridicule scientists. There's no use in it. The whole human race is ridiculous enough, that any man should with barbed laughter slay his neighbor. A pompous scientist would be like a dogmatic religionist: There's no arguing with an *idee fixeé*. But pomposity is the exception and not the rule—except a man goes in unannounced on, say, Doctor Slipher, and tells him: "Look here! You don't know anything at all about astronomy, you sap you! Now I'm going to tell you all about it." You and I know he'd have to be a much better astronomer than Dr. Slipher, to get away with it. Well—until Russell's a better scientist than he is a writer, he'd better save his guessing. I too can guess, but I don't want to do too much of it; might guess altogether wrong some time—too loudly—and be ridiculed for my pains. Ridicule stings worst, when you realize you have it coming!—David G. Markham, General Delivery, Greenville, Calif.

Guernsey has a nice one coming up.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Unknown—November, 1939

Cover—fair. Gladney generally poor. Get some new cover artists.

Stories—in order of preference:

1. "Sons of the Bear-God"—better than "Flame Winds," but still not good enough to take up so much space in Unknown. De Camp and Hubbard are your best novelists.

2. "The Bronze Door"—excellent narration and skillfully subdued handling put this tale over with me in a big way. More by Chandler, please.

3. "The Monocle"—easily Guernsey's best. Without being exactly gruesome, it sort of gave me goose pimples, especially the ending.

4. "Day Off"—Gold really slipped on this one. I could hardly believe that it was written by the author who gave us the delightful "Trouble with Water" and the haunting "None but Lucifer."

5. "The Question is Answered"—not even good filler.

Illustrations:

Kramer—swell. "Sons of the Bear-God" drawings way above F. K.'s usual standard. I still want fine line work, however.

Isip—not as good as usual. Make the illustrations as fantastic as the stories.

Wesso—not so hot. Too much emphasis on figures and faces and not enough on fantasy.

Cartier—why has he not been in the last two issues? Please have him illustrate most of the novels.

Issue as a whole rates "good," which, in comparison with certain earlier issues, means "not quite up to snuff." I am expecting better issues in the future.

See you next month.—Don Johnson, 3530 Kenwood Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri.

He must like De Camp.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

If ever you let L. Sprague de Camp go—after "Lest Darkness Fall," include me out, too.

Admitting that his "Divide and Rule" was great, his latest is even better. Martin Padway is unique in fantasy-fiction. We would like to see more of him in a sequel. That goes without saying.

De Camp stands as the greatest writer of fantasy and science-fiction of the day. His yarns are almost always humorous. Without fail they are vital, interesting, satisfying stuff. "Hyperpolosity," "The Command," "The Incorrigible," "The Gnarly Man" are typical of his best style, of which "Lest Darkness Fall" is the supreme example.

Then, of course, for those who cherish science articles, De Camp's are tops.

The shorts in the December issue were mostly too long. Try to get something from Del Rey every month. Last month, Guernsey clicked with his "Monocle," aided and abetted by Wesso—currently in fine fettle.—Stanley Wells, 235 Noe Street, San Francisco, California.

Well—that was supposed to be the long arm of the past snatching Martin Padway.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

As a follower of Street & Smith publications through more years than I care to think about, let me first say the Unknown is the most commendable, most seriously compiled and undoubtedly the finest of all magazines attempting to bring to the man on the street some of the more legitimate explanations of the fleeting, startling thoughts that sometimes gain the upper hand in any human intelligence.

As far as classification of stories is concerned, let me say at once that there can be no such thing. Since the birth of Unknown I have avidly consumed every offering from cover to cover, and I have no complaint. I have, instead, only thanks for the superb efforts of both writers and editors.

Every boost, I am afraid, must come from, or be accompanied by, a knock. Here is my knock. The December issue of Unknown was illustrated by Cartier. A fine artist. However, I failed to discover anywhere in the magazine, any story that remotely concerned the cover illustration. May I offer you the humble suggestion that an incident be taken from one of the marvelous stories within Unknown's covers to illustrate the possibilities lying within?

The Book Review "Prophecy" was exceptionally well handled. There is food for thought in both that and "Time Travel Happens." As it transpires, I am a firm believer in the possibility of time travel.

Ave, Unknown, may your life be a long and beneficent one!—Thomas R. Myers, 218 Steward St., Jackson, Michigan.

Heh-heh! He doesn't realize the magazine's shown him what he'd like to be and do but can't!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Observations:

1. We're all just a bunch of nonexistent never-has-beens. Martinus Paduei slipped down the trunk, and by unremitting effort prevented the occurrence of the Dark Ages. A change of such magnitude eliminates this era, and us with it. Get thee from about me, thou anachronistic specters.

2. Someone is seriously mistaken. If the gun will jam, Campbell is a pen name for Lucifer. But do *Astounding* and Unknown increase the misery and torments of the people? There's little evidence. So there must be a mistake somewhere.

3. As long as it is, "Lest Darkness Fall" seemed just an abbreviated summary of events that could easily fill volumes. There should have been more of De Camp and less of the shorts. Looks like this novel is going to be the best of the year. I'm not sure, though. I'll have to see December, and then compare everything.

4. I have gotten no real chills or uneasy feelings from Unknown until I read "Time Travel Happens!" Damn if that wasn't weird. That cut of the ugly man didn't add any cheery warmth to the situation, either.—J. Dean, 53 Shrewsbury Avenue, Red Bank, New Jersey.

Well—Hubbard's back again.

Dear Editor:

I'm still waiting for another good story like "Slaves of Sleep." As an author I don't give much time to reading and incidentally don't care much about it, for I usually know what, how and why the story will end after a page or two.

For mine, I want stories with less plot and more of the mystery and unknown type without any reason behind the results. In other words mere entertainment.

Well, that's all, or something.—John Kay Benton, Ross and Main Aves., Norwood, Ohio.

WHEN IT WAS MOONLIGHT

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A writer of articles, one E. Allan Poe, sets forth to investigate a story of burial alive. Perhaps—it wasn't?

Illustrated by R. Isip

Let my heart be still a moment, and this mystery explore.
—The Raven.

His hand, as slim as a white claw, dipped a quillful of ink and wrote in one corner of the page the date—March 3, 1842. Then:

THE PREMATURE BURIAL
By Edgar A. Poe

He hated his middle name, the name of his miserly and spiteful stepfather. For a moment he considered crossing out even the initial; then he told himself that he was only wool-gathering, putting off the drudgery of writing. And write he must, or starve—the Philadelphia *Dollar Newspaper* was clamoring for the story he had promised. Well, today he had heard a tag of gossip—his mother-in-law had it from a neighbor—that revived in his mind a subject always fascinating.

He began rapidly to write, in a fine copperplate hand:

> There are certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are entirely too horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction—

This would really be an essay, not a tale, and he could do it justice. Ofter he thought of the whole world as a vast fat cemetery, close set with tombs in which not all the occupants were at rest—too many struggled unavailingly against their smothering shrouds, their locked and weighted coffin lids. What were his own literary labors, he mused, but a struggle against being shut down and throttled by a society as heavy and grim and senseless as clods heaped by a sexton's spade?

He paused, and went to the slate mantelshelf for a candle. His kerosene lamp had long ago been pawned, and it was dark for midafternoon, even in March. Elsewhere in the house his mother-in-law swept busily, and in the room next to his sounded the quiet breathing of his invalid wife. Poor Virginia slept, and for the moment knew no pain. Returning with his light, he dipped more ink and continued down the sheet:

> To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality. That it has frequently, very frequently, fallen will scarcely be denied—

Again his dark imagination savored the tale he had heard that day. It had happened here in Philadelphia, in this very quarter, less than a month ago. A widower had gone, after weeks of mourning, to his wife's tomb, with flowers. Stooping to place them on the marble slab, he had heard noise beneath. At once joyful and aghast, he fetched men and crowbars, and recovered the

body, all untouched by decay. At home that night, the woman returned to consciousness.

So said the gossip, perhaps exaggerated, perhaps not. And the house was only six blocks away from Spring Garden Street, where he sat.

Poe fetched out his notebooks and began to marshal bits of narrative for his composition—a gloomy tale of resurrection in Baltimore, another from France, a genuinely creepy citation from the *Chirurgical Journal* of Leipzig; a sworn case of revival, by electrical impulses, of a dead man in London. Then he added an experience of his own, romantically embellished, a dream adventure of his boyhood in Virginia. Just as he thought to make an end, he had a new inspiration.

Why not learn more about that reputed Philadelphia burial and the one who rose from seeming death? It would point up his piece, give it a timely local climax, insure accep-

tance—he could hardly risk a rejection. Too, it would satisfy his own curiosity. Laying down the pen, Poe got up. From a peg he took his wide black hat, his old military cloak that he had worn since his ill-fated cadet days at West Point. Huddling it round his slim little body, he opened the front door and went out.

March had come in like a lion and, lionlike, roared and rampaged over Philadelphia. Dry, cold dust blew up into Poe's full gray eyes, and he hardened his mouth under the gay dark mustache. His shins felt gooseflesh; his striped trousers were unseasonably thin and his shoes badly needed mending. Which way lay his journey?

He remembered the name of the street, and something about a ruined garden. Eventually he came to the place, or what must be the place—the garden was certainly ruined, full of dry, hardy weeds that still stood in great ragged clumps after the hard winter. Poe forced open the creaky gate, went up the rough-flagged path to the stoop. He saw a bronzed nameplate—"Gauber," it said. Yes, that was the name he had heard. He swung the knocker loudly, and thought he caught a whisper of movement inside. But the door did not open.

"Nobody lives there, Mr. Poe," said someone from the street. It was a grocery boy, with a heavy basket on his arm. Poe left the doorstep. He knew the lad; indeed he owed the grocer eleven dollars.

"Are you sure?" Poe prompted.

"Well"—and the boy shifted the weight of his burden—"if anybody lived here, they'd buy from our shop, wouldn't they? And I'd deliver, wouldn't I? But I've had this job for six months, and never set foot inside that door."

Poe thanked him and walked down the street, but did not take the turn that would lead home. Instead he sought the shop of one Pemberton, a printer and a friend, to pass the time of day and ask for a loan.

Pemberton could not lend even one dollar—times were hard—but he offered a drink of Monongahela whiskey, which Poe forced himself to refuse; then a supper of crackers, cheese and garlic sausage, which Poe thankfully shared. At home, unless his mother-in-law had begged or borrowed from the neighbors, would be only bread and molasses. It was past sundown when the writer shook hands with Pemberton, thanked him with warm courtesy for his hospitality, and ventured into the evening.

Thank Heaven, it did not rain. Poe was saddened by storms. The wind had abated and the March sky was clear save for a tiny fluff of scudding cloud and a banked dark line at the horizon, while up rose a full moon the color of frozen cream. Poe squinted from under his hat brim at the shadow-pattern on the disk. Might he not write another story of a lunar voyage—like the one about Hans Pfaal, but dead serious this time? Musing thus, he walked along the dusk-filling street until he came again opposite the ruined garden, the creaky gate, and the house with the doorplate marked: "Gauber."

Hello, the grocery boy had been wrong. There was light inside the front window, water-blue light—or was there? Anyway, motion—yes, a figure stooped there, as if to peer out at him.

Poe turned in at the gate, and knocked at the door once again.

Four or five moments of silence; then he heard the old lock grating.

The door moved inward, slowly and noisily. Poe fancied that he had been wrong about the blue light, for he saw only darkness inside. A voice spoke:

"Well, sir?"

The two words came huskily but softly, as though the door-opener scarcely breathed. Poe swept off his broad black hat and made one of his graceful bows.

"If you will pardon me—" He paused, not knowing whether he addressed man or woman. "This is the Gauber residence?"

"It is," was the reply, soft, hoarse and sexless. "Your business, sir?"

Poe spoke with official crispness; he had been a sergeant-major of artillery before he was twenty-one, and knew how to inject the proper note. "I am here on public duty," he announced. "I am a journalist, tracing a strange report."

"Journalist?" repeated his interrogator. "Strange report? Come in, sir."

Poe complied, and the door closed abruptly behind him, with a rusty snick of the lock. He remembered being in jail once, and how the door of his cell had slammed just so. It was not a pleasant memory. But he saw more clearly, now he was inside—his eyes got used to the tiny trickle of moonlight.

He stood in a dark hallway, all paneled in wood, with no furniture, drapes or pictures. With him was a woman, in full skirt and down-drawn lace cap, a woman as tall as he and with intent eyes that glowed as from within. She neither moved nor spoke, but waited for him to tell her more of his errand.

Poe did so, giving his name and, stretching a point, claiming to be a subeditor of the *Dollar Newspaper*, definitely assigned to the interview. "And now, madam, concerning this story that is rife concerning a premature burial—"

She had moved very close, but as his face turned toward her she drew back. Poe fancied that his breath had blown her away like a feather; then, remembering Pemberton's garlic sausage, he was chagrined. To confirm his new thought, the woman was offering him wine—to sweeten his breath.

"Would you take a glass of canary, Mr. Poe?" she invited, and opened a side door. He followed her into a room papered in pale blue. Moonglow, drenching it, reflected from that paper and seemed an artificial light. That was what he had seen from outside. From an undraped table his hostess lifted a bottle, poured wine into a metal goblet and offered it.

Poe wanted that wine, but he had recently promised his sick wife, solemnly and honestly, to abstain from even a sip of the drink that so easily upset him. Through thirsty lips he said: "I thank you kindly, but I am a temperance man."

"Oh," and she smiled. Poe saw white teeth. Then: "I am Elva Gauber—Mrs. John Gauber. The matter of which you ask I cannot explain clearly, but it is true. My husband was buried, in the Eastman Lutheran Churchyard—"

"I had heard, Mrs. Gauber, that the burial concerned a woman."

"No, my husband. He had been ill. He felt cold and quiet. A physician, a Dr. Mechem, pronounced him dead, and he was interred beneath a marble slab in his family vault." She sounded weary, but her voice was calm. "This happened shortly after the New Year. On Valentine's Day, I brought flowers. Beneath his slab he stirred and struggled. I had him brought forth. And he lives—after a fashion—today."

"Lives today?" repeated Poe. "In this house?"

"Would you care to see him? Interview him?"

Poe's heart raced, his spine chilled. It was his peculiarity that such sensations gave him pleasure. "I would like nothing better," he assured her, and she went to another door, an inner one.

Opening it, she paused on the threshold, as though summoning her resolution for a plunge into cold, swift water. Then she started down a flight of steps.

Poe followed, unconsciously drawing the door shut behind him.

The gloom of midnight, of prison —yes, of the tomb—fell at once upon those stairs. He heard Elva Gauber gasp:

"No—the moonlight—let it in—" And then she fell, heavily and limply, rolling downstairs.

Aghast, Poe quickly groped his way after her. She lay against a door at the foot of the flight, wedged against the panel. He touched her—she was cold and rigid, without motion or elasticity of life. His thin hand groped for and found the knob of the lower door, flung it open. More dim reflected moonlight, and he made shift to drag the woman into it.

Almost at once she sighed heavily, lifted her head, and rose. "How stupid of me," she apologized hoarsely.

"The fault was mine," protested Poe. "Your nerves, your health, have naturally suffered. The sudden dark —the closeness—overcame you." He fumbled in his pocket for a tinderbox. "Suffer me to strike a light."

But she held out a hand to stop him. "No, no. The moon is sufficient." She walked to a small, oblong pane set in the wall. Her hands, thin as Poe's own, with long grubby nails, hooked on the sill. Her face, bathed in the full light of the moon, strengthened and grew calm. She breathed deeply, almost voluptuously. "I am quite recovered," she said. "Do not fear for me. You need not stand so near, sir."

He had forgotten that garlic odor, and drew back contritely. She must be as sensitive to the smell as . . . as . . . what was it that was sickened and driven away by garlic? Poe could not remember, and took time to note that they were in a basement, stone-walled and with a floor of dirt. In one corner water seemed to drip, forming a dank pool of mud. Close to this, set into the wall, showed a latched trapdoor of planks, thick and wide, cleated crosswise, as though to cover a window. But no window would be set so low. Everything smelt earthy and close, as though fresh air had been shut out for decades.

"Your husband is here?" he inquired.

"Yes." She walked to the shutter-like trap, unlatched it and drew it open.

The recess beyond was as black as ink, and from it came a feeble mutter. Poe followed Elva Gauber, and strained his eyes. In a little stone-flagged nook a bed had been made up. Upon it lay a man, stripped almost naked. His skin was as white as dead bone, and only his eyes, now opening, had life. He gazed at Elva Gauber, and past her at Poe.

"Go away," he mumbled.

"Sir," ventured Poe formally, "I have come to hear of how you came to life in the grave—"

"It's a lie," broke in the man on the pallet. He writhed halfway to a sitting posture, laboring upward as against a crushing weight. The wash of moonlight showed how wasted and

fragile he was. His face stared and snarled bare-toothed, like a skull. "A lie, I say!" he cried, with a sudden strength that might well have been his last. "Told by this monster who is not—my wife—"

The shutter-trap slammed upon his cries. Elva Gauber faced Poe, withdrawing a pace to avoid his garlic breath.

"You have seen my husband," she said. "Was it a pretty sight, sir?"

He did not answer, and she moved across the dirt to the stair doorway. "Will you go up first?" she asked. "At the top, hold the door open, that I may have—" She said "life," or, perhaps, "light." Poe could not be sure which.

Plainly she, who had almost welcomed his intrusion at first, now sought to lead him away. Her eyes, compelling as shouted commands, were fixed upon him. He felt their power, and bowed to it.

Obediently he mounted the stairs, and stood with the upper door wide. Elva Gauber came up after him. At the top her eyes again seized his. Suddenly Poe knew more than ever before about the mesmeric impulses he loved to write about.

"I hope," she said measuredly, "that you have not found your visit fruitless. I live here alone—seeing nobody, caring for the poor thing that was once my husband, John Gauber. My mind is not clear. Perhaps my manners are not good. Forgive me, and good night."

POE FOUND himself ushered from the house, and outside the wind was howling once again. The front door closed behind him, and the lock grated.

The fresh air, the whip of gale in his face, and the absence of Elva Gauber's impelling gaze suddenly brought him back, as though from sleep, to a realization of what had happened—or what had not happened.

He had come out, on this uncomfortable March evening, to investigate the report of a premature burial. He had seen a ghastly sick thing, that had called the gossip a lie. Somehow, then, he had been drawn abruptly away—stopped from full study of what might be one of the strangest adventures it was ever a writer's good fortune to know. Why was he letting things drop at this stage?

He decided not to let them drop. That would be worse than staying away altogether.

He made up his mind, formed quickly a plan. Leaving the doorstep, he turned from the gate, slipped quickly around the house. He knelt by the foundation at the side, just where a small oblong pane was set flush with the ground.

Bending his head, he found that he could see plainly inside, by reason of the flood of moonlight—a phenomenon, he realized, for generally an apartment was disclosed only by light within. The open doorway to the stairs, the swamp mess of mud in the corner, the out-flung trapdoor, were discernible. And something stood or huddled at the exposed niche—something that bent itself upon and above the frail white body of John Gauber.

Full skirt, white cap—it was Elva Gauber. She bent herself down, her face was touching the face or shoulder of her husband.

Poe's heart, never the healthiest of organs, began to drum and race. He pressed closer to the pane, for a better glimpse of what went on in the cellar. His shadow cut away some of the light. Elva Gauber turned to look.

Her face was as pale as the moon

itself. Like the moon, it was shadowed in irregular patches. She came quickly, almost running, toward the pane where Poe crouched. He saw her, plainly and at close hand.

Dark, wet, sticky stains lay upon her mouth and cheeks. Her tongue roved out, licking at the stains—

Blood!

Poe sprang up and ran to the front of the house. He forced his thin, trembling fingers to seize the knocker, to swing it heavily again and again. When there was no answer, he pushed heavily against the door itself—it did not give. He moved to a window, rapped on it, pried at the sill, lifted his fist to smash the glass.

A silhouette moved beyond the pane, and threw it up. Something shot out at him like a pale snake striking—before he could move back, fingers had twisted in the front of his coat. Elva Gauber's eyes glared into his.

Her cap was off, her dark hair fallen in disorder. Blood still smeared and dewed her mouth and jowls.

"You have pried too far," she said, in a voice as measured and cold as the drip from icicles. "I was going to spare you, because of the odor about you that repelled me—the garlic. I showed you a little, enough to warn any wise person, and let you go. Now—"

Poe struggled to free himself. Her grip was immovable, like the clutch of a steel trap. She grimaced in triumph, yet she could not quite face him—the garlic still clung to his breath.

"Look in my eyes," she bade him. "Look—you cannot refuse, you cannot escape. You will die, with John—and the two of you, dying, shall rise again like me. I'll have two fountains of life while you remain—two companions after you die."

"Woman," said Poe, fighting against her stabbing gaze, "you are mad."

She snickered gustily. "I am sane, and so are you. We both know that I speak the truth. We both know the futility of your struggle." Her voice rose a little. "Through a chink in the tomb, as I lay dead, a ray of moonlight streamed and struck my eyes: I woke. I struggled. I was set free. Now at night, when the moon shines— *Ugh!* Don't breathe that herb in my face!"

She turned her head away. At that instant it seemed to Poe that a curtain of utter darkness fell, and with it sank down the form of Elva Gauber.

HE PEERED in the sudden gloom. She was collapsed across the window sill, like a discarded puppet in its booth. Her hand still twisted in the bosom of his coat, and he pried himself loose from it, finger by steely, cold finger. Then he turned to flee from this place of shadowed peril to body and soul.

As he turned, he saw whence had come the dark. A cloud had come up from its place on the horizon—the fat, sooty bank he had noted there at sundown—and now it obscured the moon. Poe paused, in midretreat, gazing.

His thoughtful eye gauged the speed and size of the cloud. It curtained the moon, would continue to curtain it for—well, ten minutes. And for that ten minutes Elva Gauber would lie motionless, lifeless. She had told the truth about the moon giving her life. Hadn't she fallen like one slain on the stairs when they were darkened. Poe began grimly to string the evidence together.

It was Elva Gauber, not her husband, who had died and gone to the family vault: She had come back to

life, or a mockery of life, by touch of the moon's rays. Such light was an unpredictable force—it made dogs howl, it flogged madmen to violence, it brought fear, or black sorrow, or ecstasy. Old legends said that it was the birth of fairies, the transformation of werewolves, the motive power of broom-riding witches. It was surely the source of the strength and evil animating what had been the corpse of Elva Gauber —and he, Poe, must not stand there dreaming.

He summoned all the courage that was his, and scrambled in at the window through which slumped the woman's form. He groped across the room to the cellar door, opened it and went down the stairs, through the door at the bottom, and into the stone-walled basement.

It was dark, moonless still. Poe paused only to bring forth his tinder box, strike a light and kindle the end of a tightly twisted linen rag. It gave a feeble steady light, and he found his way to the shutter, opened it and touched the naked, wasted shoulder of John Gauber.

"Get up," he said. "I've come to save you."

The skullface feebly shifted its position to meet his gaze. The man managed to speak, moaningly:

"Useless. I can't move—unless she lets me. Her eyes keep me here —half alive. I'd have died long ago, but somehow—"

Poe thought of a wretched spider, paralyzed by the sting of a mud-wasp, lying helpless in its captive's close den until the hour of feeding comes. He bent down, holding his blazing tinder close. He could see Gauber's neck, and it was a mass of tiny puncture wounds, some of them still beaded with blood drops fresh or dried. He winced, but bode firm in his purpose.

"Let me guess the truth," he said

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quickly. "Your wife was brought home from the grave, came back to a seeming of life. She put a spell on you, or played a trick—made you a helpless prisoner. That isn't contrary to nature, that last. I've studied mesmerism."

"It's true," John Gauber mumbled.

"And nightly she comes to drink your blood?"

Gauber weakly nodded. "Yes. She was beginning just now, but ran upstairs. She will be coming back."

"Good," said Poe bleakly. "Perhaps she will come back to more than she expects. Have you ever heard of vampires? Probably not, but I have studied them, too. I began to guess, I think, when first she was so repelled by the odor of garlic. Vampires lie motionless by day, and walk and feed at night. They are creatures of the moon—their food is blood. Come."

Poe broke off, put out his light, and lifted the man in his arms. Gauber was as light as a child. The writer carried him to the slanting shelter of the closed-in staircase, and there set him against the wall. Over him Poe spread his old cadet cloak. In the gloom, the gray of the cloak harmonized with the gray of the wall stones. The poor fellow would be well hidden.

Next Poe flung off his coat, waistcoat and shirt. Heaping his clothing in a deeper shadow of the stairway, he stood up, stripped to the waist. His skin was almost as bloodlessly pale as Gauber's, his chest and arms almost as gaunt. He dared believe that he might pass momentarily for the unfortunate man.

The cellar sprang full of light again. The cloud must be passing from the moon. Poe listened. There was a dragging sound above, then footsteps.

Elva Gauber, the blood drinker by night, had revived.

Now for it. Poe hurried to the niche, thrust himself in and pulled the trapdoor shut after him.

He grinned, sharing a horrid paradox with the blackness around him. He had heard all the fabled ways of destroying vampires—transfixing stakes, holy water, prayer, fire. But he, Edgar Allan Poe, had evolved a new way. Myriads of tales whispered frighteningly of fiends lying in wait for normal men, but who ever heard of a normal man lying in wait for a fiend? Well, he had never considered himself normal, in spirit, or brain, or taste.

He stretched out, feet together, hands crossed on his bare midriff. Thus it would be in the tomb, he found himself thinking. To his mind came a snatch of poetry by a man named Bryant, published long ago in a New England review—*Breathless darkness, and the narrow house.* It was breathless and dark enough in this hole, Heaven knew, and narrow as well. He rejected, almost hysterically, the implication of being buried. To break the ugly spell, that daunted him where thought of Elva Gauber failed, he turned sideways to face the wall, his naked arm lying across his cheek and temple.

As his ear touched the musty bedding, it brought to him once again the echo of footsteps, footsteps descending stairs. They were rhythmic, confident. They were eager.

Elva Gauber was coming to seek again her interrupted repast.

Now she was crossing the floor. She did not pause or turn aside—she had not noticed her husband, lying under the cadet cloak in the shadow of the stairs. The noise came straight to the trapdoor, and he heard her fumbling for the latch.

LIGHT, blue as skimmed milk, poured into his nook. A shadow fell in the midst of it, full upon him. His imagination, ever outstripping reality, whispered that the shadow had weight, like lead—oppressive, baleful.

"John," said the voice of Elva Gauber in his ear, "I've come back. You know why—you know what for." Her voice sounded greedy, as though it came through loose, trembling lips. "You're my only source of strength now. I thought tonight, that a stranger—but he got away. He had a cursed odor about him, anyway."

Her hand touched the skin of his neck. She was prodding him, like a butcher fingering a doomed beast.

"Don't hold yourself away from me, John," she was commanding, in a voice of harsh mockery. "You know it won't do any good. This is the night of the full moon, and I have power for anything, anything!" She was trying to drag his arm away from his face. "You won't gain by—" She broke off, aghast. Then, in a wild-dry-throated scream:

"*You're not John!*"

Poe whipped over on his back, and his bird-claw hands shot out and seized her—one hand clinching upon her snaky disorder of dark hair, the other digging its fingertips into the chill flesh of her arm.

The scream quivered away into a horrible breathless rattle. Poe dragged his captive violently inward, throwing all his collected strength into the effort. Her feet were jerked from the floor and she flew into the recess, hurtling above and beyond Poe's recumbent body. She struck the inner stones with a crashing force that might break bones, and would have collapsed upon Poe; but, at the same moment, he had released her and slid swiftly out upon the floor of the cellar.

With frantic haste he seized the edge of the back-flung trapdoor. Elva Gauber struggled up on hands and knees, among the tumbled bedclothes in the niche; then Poe had slammed the panel shut.

She threw herself against it from within, yammering and wailing like an animal in a trap. She was almost as strong as he, and for a moment he thought that she would win out of the niche. But, sweating and wheezing, he bore against the planks with his shoulder, bracing his feet against the earth. His fingers found the latch, lifted it, forced it into place.

"Dark," moaned Elva Gauber from inside. "Dark—no moon—" Her voice trailed off.

Poe went to the muddy pool in the corner, thrust in his hands. The muck was slimy but workable. He pushed a double handful of it against the trapdoor, sealing cracks and edges. Another handful, another. Using his palms like trowels, he coated the boards with thick mud.

"Gauber," he said breathlessly, "how are you?"

"All right—I think." The voice was strangely strong and clear. Looking over his shoulder, Poe saw that Gauber had come upright of himself, still pale but apparently steady. "What are you doing?" Gauber asked.

"Walling her up," jerked out Poe, scooping still more mud. "Walling her up forever, with her devil."

He had a momentary flash of inspiration, a symbolic germ of a story; in it a man sealed a woman into such a nook of the wall, and with her an embodiment of active evil—perhaps in the form of a black cat.

Pausing at last to breathe deeply,

he smiled to himself. Even in the direst of danger, the most heart-breaking moment of toil and fear, he must ever be coining new plots for stories.

"I cannot thank you enough," Gauber was saying to him. "I feel that all will be well—if only she stays there."

Poe put his ear to the wall. "Not a whisper of motion, sir. She's shut off from moonlight—from life and power. Can you help me with my clothes? I fell terribly chilled."

HIS MOTHER-IN-LAW met him on the threshold when he returned to the house in Spring Garden Street. Under the white widow's cap, her strong-boned face was drawn with worry.

"Eddie, are you ill?" She was really asking if he had been drinking. A look reassured her. "No," she answered herself, "but you've been away from home so long. And you're dirty, Eddie—filthy. You must wash."

He let her lead him in, pour hot water into a basin. As he scrubbed himself, he formed excuses, a banal lie about a long walk for inspiration, a moment of dizzy weariness, a stumble into a mud puddle.

"I'll make you some nice hot coffee, Eddie," his mother-in-law offered.

"Please," he responded, and went back to his room with the slate mantelpiece. Again he lighted the candle, sat down and took up his pen.

His mind was embellishing the story inspiration that had come to him at such a black moment, in the cellar of the Gauber house. He'd work on that tomorrow. The *United States Saturday Post* would take it, he hoped. Title? He would call it simply "The Black Cat."

But to finish the present task! He dipped his pen in ink. How to begin? How to end? How, after writing and publishing such an account, to defend himself against the growing whisper of his insanity?

He decided to forget it, if he could—at least to seek healthy company, comfort, quiet—perhaps even to write some light verse, some humorous articles and stories. For the first time in his life, he had had enough of the macabre.

Quickly he wrote a final paragraph:

> There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell—but the imagination of man is no Carathis, to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! The grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful—but, like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us—they must be suffered to slumber, or we will perish.

That would do for the public, decided Edgar Allan Poe. In any case, it would do for the Philadelphia *Dollar Newspaper*.

His mother-in-law brought in the coffee.

Continued from page 54

the mail and helped identify the bodies—

"Tick-tock, tick-tock—"

She looked at a picture of herself at the age of two, lying on a table, quite nude and apparently on the verge of crying. She stiffened. Footsteps were on the street again, slow, laggard steps. She ached to go to the window and look but she would not let herself risk the disappointment. It was better to stand here and listen for a few seconds longer until those footsteps also went by.

But this time the sound ceased before the house and, after a moment, she heard feet scuffing slowly up the steps. She turned to face the hall door, hoping the bell would not ring and thus send her hopes crashing. The bell did not ring. A key rattled in the lock and the door swung open. open.

With a cry of gladness she rushed to the door.

CLAY STOOD on the sill, looking at her out of beaten eyes. He made no response to her greeting. She stopped within a few feet of him, holding out both her hands. Clay looked away.

She took his arm and led him into the front room. Her heart had begun to beat in her throat, for she had not missed the torn place over his pocket where his wings had been. But she said nothing, forcing him gently into a chair.

He started to speak in protest but she placed her hands over his lips and the vibrant touch made pain course through him. She went out and, a moment later, came back with a bottle and glass upon a tray. She poured him three fingers of scotch and put it in his hand. He elected to look into the drink, not at her.

"Laure, there's something—"

"In the morning," she said. "Things always look blacker at night."

"Now," said Clay. "I cannot stay here tonight. I should not have come here at all—except—"

"Not come *here?* Oh, my darling." And only now did she give way under it. She dropped to her knees beside him and, by taking his face in her hands, made him look at her. "Nothing, no matter how awful, will ever keep us apart. Not to come back—to me?"

"I've walked for hours," said Clay dully. "I tried not to and each time I neared this street I had to fight to go away. I've come back—to tell you—good-by."

"You can't, Clay! You can't! I'm yours and where you go, I go. I don't care why or how—" She looked steadily at him through a mist. "They've hurt you, Clay. They've hurt you and I could thrash them for it. Tomorrow morning, when we know for certain what must be done, we'll have time enough to make our plans—"

"No. No, Laura. You can't go with me. I can't stay here tonight."

"You don't—love me any more?"

"Oh, you know that that's not true. If I didn't, I would stay. But you don't understand. I can't let you run this risk—"

"Risk? From you?"

"Yes, Laura, yes. From me. I'm a pariah. Everyone around me meets disaster and the next . . . the next, Laura, may be you."

"I am not afraid, Clay."

"Laura, don't make it difficult. We've got to accept this thing for the truth it is. Everything I touch perishes."

"Coincidence."

"No, it's not. Nor superstition. It's truth, Laura. Tonight I found out that it isn't my imagination. I thought I was being targeted, bracketed by the wrath of some Being I could not name. But that's not so. There are others like me, thousands of others. I have been in a position to do great harm. Those others have not always been. Some of them bring only sickness and injury. Some of them bring death. I bring death, Laura."

"What nonsense! You?"

"It is true. They even have a name for such as I. An 'accident prone.' Every insurance company knows about it. By cutting out such as I they can bring their accidents down to almost nothing. So there is truth to it. This is no wild fancy, no insanity of mine. If the world did not know it to be the truth, I might take my chances and go on. But I cannot."

"You mean that you, too, may die?" said Laura in a low voice.

"No. No, that's the terrible part. They say I cannot die, that I only bring death. There have been nineteen, Laura. Nineteen people who would be alive today had I not been near them!"

"They . . . told you this was . . . true?"

"Yes. And I know it to be so. Death has struck all around me and yet I have not been touched. Your mother, Evanston—"

"So they told you about him."

"You knew?"

"I tried to keep it from you. You were so happy—"

"The professor, a gambler, a teamster, a storekeeper, a woman, your mother, Evanston, all Flight 21 except myself."

"With luck, we can outlive this, Clay."

"Luck?" he cried savagely, his wrath against fate breaking through. "Luck? I have all I need and more. Luck! I win at roulette, I find money in a trash can, I live through things that no man could hope to live through under other circumstances. I outlast even an airline crash! Luck! I've ten thousand times as much luck as I need. I sit down on a doctor's steps and he cures me. I even—" He stopped, looking white.

She waited for him to continue.

In a low, controlled voice, he said, "That night, when I met Dr. Evanston there was an appointment already made for me. I did not make it. I had no friend that could have made it— So—it's all true. The fates look after me. I murder within the law."

"This will all pass, Clay."

"Nineteen people," he said softly. "All dead because of me. And who will be next, Laura?"

. . .

CLAY PUT the glass on the table and got up. "I should not be here. You are imperiled by my very presence in this room. I must go, Laura.

If I love you, I cannot ever see you —again."

She caught at his hands. "You think I am afraid, Clay? If I had been afraid, I would have left you the night Evanston died. True, I was able to see that everyone that knew you met death. But I did not leave, Clay. I would rather die with you near me than live without you. You've got to believe me. You've got to!"

He laid his hand upon her silken head as she wept against him. He could feel the courage seeping out of him. He had been so determined not to come back at all and then, when he had come, to tell her and go away that now, in reaction, he was very tired.

Pulling her chin up with his hand he looked at her for a long time. He turned away and picked up the drink she had poured him and drank it.

"You'll stay—tonight?" she faltered. "Just tonight. You're so weary—I can feel it."

He felt his resolution fade as he looked from her to the door and back again. For an instant a voice cried out within him. What right had he to put her in such danger? At any moment something might happen to her, to the only person in the world that could ever mean anything to him—

"Just—tonight," she pleaded.

He sank down in the chair again. He had no right to cast upon her death's shadow but neither did he have any right to break her heart. His will surged within him and when he looked at her again, he smiled.

Seeing it she became animated, trying to drown out sorrow with activity. She plumped up a pillow in back of him and took off his soaked shoes and poured him another drink and didn't even insist that he light the pipe. She flew from the room and came back almost immediately, it seemed, with ham on rye sandwiches—his favorite.

He did not want the food but he wanted to please her and so he ate. Now that he had begun to act a part, it came easier to him. He knew what he would do, this night. But she would not know until she awoke.

He asked her about the painting and she told him in detail. She outlined half a dozen schemes she had for remodeling the outside of the place and selling off the iron statuary in the yard and washing the house's face and making the back laundry into a sun porch where he could read, and patching up the old den so that he could just throw things into it and feel sure that nobody would even try to straighten it up—except maybe once a year when he'd simply lost everything.

Listening to her, he rested. This was like a long pause between the crash of instruments in a symphony, but he shut out the knowledge that, too soon, the mad violence would continue.

It was almost two when they went up the stairs, his arm about her. She showed him what she could do with pastels and he had to see if the paint was still wet and then had to scrub very hard to get it off his fingers.

A little later he eased into the bed and quested for the light with her smile warm upon him. The room went dark.

HE AWOKE with a start; guilty at the thought of having slept here at all. By the glowing dial of his watch he found that dawn was less than a half hour away. The street lamp on the corner cast a pale light through the room. Laura, her hair like a halo about her lovely face, slept on, undisturbed. Very cautiously he re-

leased her hold upon his arm. He looked at her hand for a moment and then kissed it.

The floor was very cold and a draft whined through the crack under the door. He could not find his slippers and abandoned them. Like a shadow he moved across the room, collecting the contents of his pockets from the chair. Easily he slid out and the latch clicked behind him.

In the next room, which was his own, he went about dressing with haste. He looked at his uniform, hanging on the back of the door, for several seconds. It was cleaned and pressed and the buttons glistened with recent attention. He passed it by, choosing a gray business suit, recently purchased. He had difficulty in finding a hat upon the dark shelf and instead his fingers touched something cold and familiar. He was motionless.

Slowly he pulled the holster to him. The Webley was sticky with the grease in which he had packed it away and he wiped it with the gun-rag. His experienced fingers slid out the magazine and counted the bullets to find a full load. With sudden decision he replaced the clip and thrust the Webley into his waistband. Quickly he got into his coat and picked up his hat from the closet floor.

He tiptoed past Laura's door. The stairs creaked forlornly as he went down. In the parlor he found a sheet of paper and a pen.

> This had to be. Because, you see—
> I love you. CLAY.

XIV.

A DAWN mist hung over everything. A chill wind promised snow. Street lamps, fading out before the creep of pearl in the east, gave the world a tired look.

Clay walked swiftly. He knew where he was going now and what he had to do and, by reaching a decision he had discarded most of the weight which oppressed him. Laura would get over it. She would have to. If they didn't make her come for him—

The park was a toneless expanse of gray, deserted and hushed. He strode into a bypath and went down it, knowing that it would lead to a favorable spot.

In a circle of bushes he halted. A bench, hidden here, invited him to sit down. He pulled paper and the pen from his pocket and wrote:

> There is money in my pocket to bury me. Please do not make any effort to identify me for that would bring sorrow to another.

From his wrist he broke his identification disk and buried it in the loose dirt. Then, in a businesslike fashion, he gave his attention to the gun. He took it down so that there could be no mistake. It was in perfect working order, for he snapped the trigger several times before he replaced the clip. He worked the slide and slid off the safety. For a moment, then, he looked at the eastern sky where clouds were turning a dull red.

He was almost smiling when he placed the muzzle against his temple. He had seen men shot with a 9 mm. slug. There would be no question about his dying instantly.

With a jerk he pulled the trigger.

Startled, he took the gun down and looked at it. The safeties were off, but the trigger would not depress!

He took out the clip and tried. The gun clicked. He put back the clip and left the chamber empty. Again the gun snapped successfully.

He slid the slide back and saw the bullet leap into the barrel.

Again he placed the muzzle to his temple, pulled the trigger.

And again the trigger refused to depress!

Angrily, for he had used this gun to good effect twice in his life, he sprang up. Taking aim at the turf he closed his hand. At this slight touch the gun went off!

Once more he placed the muzzle against his head.

Once more the trigger would not go down.

With a curse Clay flung the thing from him, out of sight into the brush. After a moment he went on his hands and knees to find it. This time he fired at a stump and the shot went roaring through the dawn.

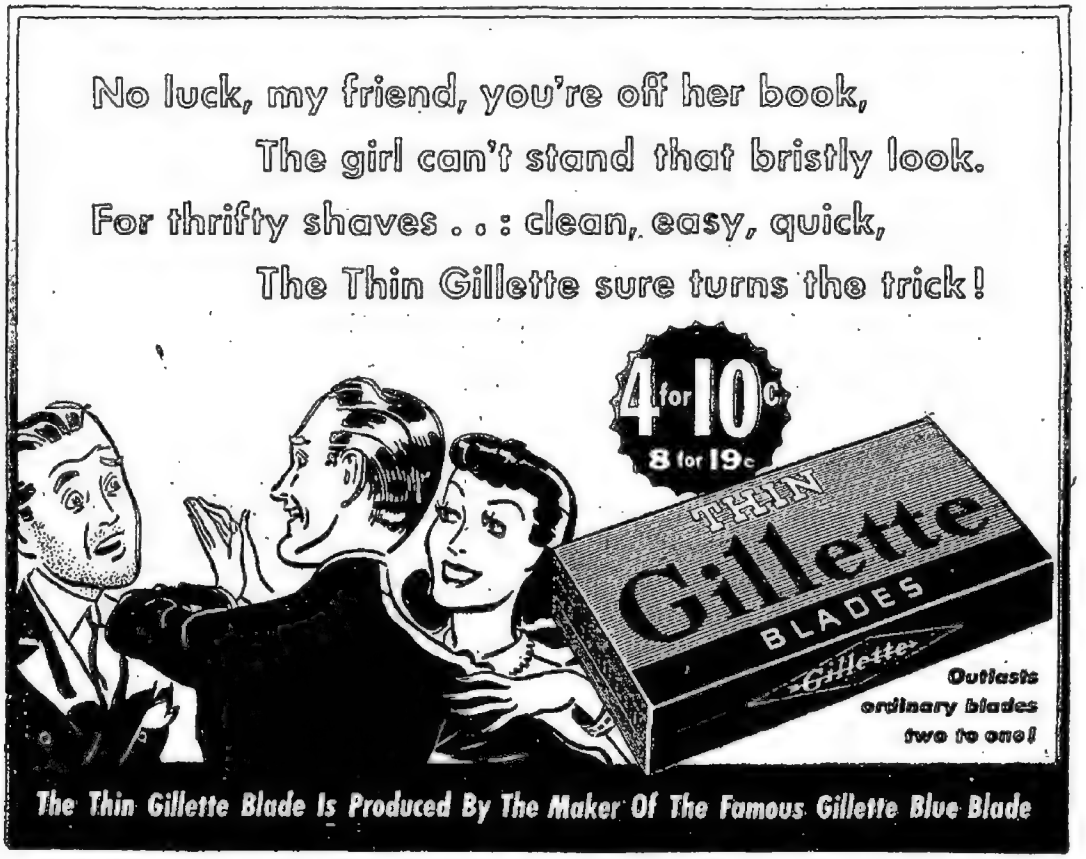
He was trembling, damp all over. His palms were so slippery he could scarcely hold the gun. With a prayer he again tried to kill himself. But, without any visible cause, the weapon would not function.

Feeling foolish and betrayed, Clay thrust the Webley into his belt and tore up the note. He dug up his identification disk and mended the silver chain.

He heard somebody coming on the run from the street and he moved off through the shrubs.

AN HOUR and a half later, Clay stood against the rail in the middle of a bridge, looking moodily at the East River. A long tow of barges was passing slowly beneath and he was waiting patiently for the water to be clear once more.

At last he could look straight down into the murky flow. Down there was oblivion, release from bondage. By doing this he would give life back to those who would die because of him in the future. It was the only way he could pay for those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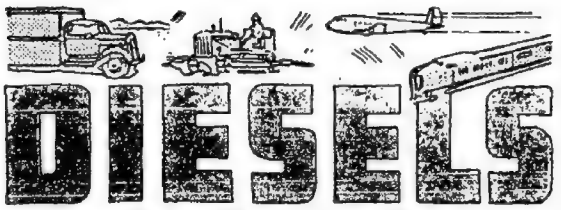

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lives he had already inadvertently taken.

He swung up to the top of the rail and braced himself for the leap. He pushed out.

Suddenly he was aware that he could not get free. Distraitly he looked at the rail. His coat was caught on the other side and all the tugging in the world would not free it. He climbed back and loosened it.

Once more he strove to drop.

Once more his coat caught and held him.

Angrily he changed his place. But again his coat caught.

In a wave of madness he looked up at the sky and shook his fist. *"Is there no release?"*

A car was streaking over the bridge, traveling very fast. Clay glanced at it, wondering if he had been seen. And before his stricken glance, the automobile swerved violently, leaped the wall, tore through the rail and arced out through space, trailing a scream of terror behind it.

A small plume of spray arose from far below and the car was gone.

Clay strove to dive after it in the wild hope that he could pull someone out. But a twisted girder tripped him and then a cop was thrusting him back. Down below, the water was smooth and still.

For hours he wandered through the town, keeping to alleys and quiet streets. He did not look at any-

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thing, crossing blindly against lights, making no effort whatever to protect himself from traffic. Sooner or later, he knew, something would happen around him. It would be kinder, he thought, to go to a room somewhere and just sit down and look at the wall. That way, he might save someone.

But twice he tried to enter hotels. The first time the clerk would not admit to having a vacant room, the second—

He shuddered.

Overhead he heard the roar of the El, storming along high over the street. A gleam of decision came to his eyes. He could not let this go on, living through this, strewing death wherever he went! There was one way—

He leaped up the El steps to the station and paid his nickel. Eagerly he went through the turnstile on to the platform. A train had just left and no one was waiting.

Smiling, Clay paced up and down, tuned to the approach of another train. This time there would be no withholding him. There were no rails here to catch his coat, no mechanism to fail.

Toward the station rattled the dingy train, swaying from side to side on the light rails, waking the echoes even above the roar of the street below.

Clay stepped to the edge. This would be swift and certain, for he was far up the platform and the train had hardly begun to slow down for the stop.

He leaped down upon the track, directly in the path of the train!

He closed his eyes, waiting for the shock which would come in a split second.

Suddenly there was a rending crash. Clay was tricked into thinking he had been struck, but when he opened his eyes he was standing, unharmed, between the rails. A few feet from him the splintered first car was rolling over, spilling people. The other two cars had left the track, crashing over the edge to dash themselves to bits in the street below. The lead car was hauled half off and teetered there, making a bridge down to the pavement.

This train, filled with noon-hour traffic—

Clay saw the spread rails just beyond him and knew why he had failed. He saw the dead and injured littering the track, heard screams of agony.

The cold breath of death was close about him here. He could not move, knowing he would be able to render no aid. Most of these people were beyond aid.

He turned away and within him he felt madness shrieking to take control.

THERE was only one out, one way he knew so well that he could not be betrayed. And a long period of thought convinced him that he had only this one out. In a plane he might be able to kill himself, for there he knew all the tricks. But no plane here would be offered him and he winced to think of the consequences to others should he try to steal one.

No, there was only one way he could feed the appetite of destruction without being, himself, driven insane.

In a telegraph office he scribbled out his message and read it back:

"IN PERFECT HEALTH. WOULD LIKE TO RENEW MY COMMISSION. AM LEAVING FOR MONTREAL THIS AFTERNOON.
"CLAYTON MC LEAN."

At least, he told himself as he paid the charge, Laura would be safe.

XV

At Halifax, Captain C. McLean R.C.A.F., C.E.F. stood with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, shivering a little in the wind which came swooping unresisted up the concrete dock, looked up at the side of the *Empire*. The rusty steel wall seemed to be impervious to any possible harm, so thick and strong it looked. The *Empire* had sailed the Seven Seas for twenty years and more, encountering ice floes and hurricanes alike and never once giving a thought to striking her colors before anything. Great nets were scooping cargo from the dock and depositing it in the holds to the scream of overworked winches. Here went a plane, boxed for reassembly in France, there went a truck. But these were not important at all compared to the bulk of the cargo—food.

Clay, for the moment, was mused into a semihappiness borne of waiting and inaction. For two weeks not one thing had happened around him. Not so much as a sprained ankle! And he pondered the possibility that perhaps the aura about him was wearing off.

When he had taken a few flights at the Canadian dromes he had had an observer pushed off on him and he had been in terror lest that observer reach the ground dead and in separate chunks. But the observer had kept right on living and at this astonishing fact Clay picked up a little heart.

Then there was the case of the bridge game which he had played with three brother officers the night before. They had thoroughly trimmed "the Yank" and had been quite jubilant about it. And though he lost over sixty dollars, the thing put Clay into such remarkably good spirits that he stood the drinks until one a. m.

As a former overseas officer, his opinion was much respected and he had had to hold forth at length on professional subjects. This, too, had served to bolster his confidence in the possible return of normalcy. Man is an adaptable animal and more so if a soldier.

A thought was taking form very gradually, born out of an ardent longing which, at first, he had not dared make known to himself. The desire had been creeping over him all morning and at first, pushing it aside, he had thought to drown it by keeping it as nebulous as possible. But desires are willful things and this one squirmed through his consciousness until he found himself turning away from the *Empire* and passing between the gate guards on his way into the town.

Not until he entered a drugstore did he realize what he was about for he had told himself too often that he must not. But, for two and a half weeks nothing had occurred. Perhaps—

"Phones?" said Clay to the proprietor.

The man changed the note Clay gave him and directed him to the back of the store. Even now Clay tried to oppose himself. But the desire was too strong. Within half an hour he was sailing. Before he went he had to know—

"Long distance, please." And then, "I wish to speak to Mrs. Laura McLean, New York City."

"Personally, sir?"

"Personally."

The line went dead for him while his call ranged out from city to city. He waited in the stuffy booth, almost able to hear his own heart hammering with his ears as well as his throat muscles.

"Would you please give me the address, sir?"

Clay gave it.

Again he waited.

"Laura McLean, sir?"

"That is correct."

"Would you like a report on your call?"

"Please," said Clay, instantly alarmed.

"A Mrs. Laura McLean is listed in New York at the address you name, sir, but the operator tells me that the phone has been disconnected."

"No! That can't be true! Let me speak to the New York operator."

And, after a little, "No, sir, we have no other order for connection. The phone was disconnected a week ago. If there is any other party to whom you would like to speak—"

"No . . . no other party."

He dropped the report fee into the box and wandered dazedly out into the street to stand at the curb and stare unseeingly at the lines of trucks which moved by. Suddenly he turned and strode down the avenue toward a telegraph office. Anxiously he wrote out the message. If she had moved because she could not stand the sight of the house, then this would be forwarded to her.

LAURA I AM ABOARD THE EMPIRE DAY AFTER TOMORROW YOU CAN REACH ME AT SEA WITH A RADIOGRAM I MUST KNOW IF YOU ARE ALL RIGHT.
CLAY

The *Empire* was not a troop ship and the government would forward any message to him. He did not dare put down any sailing time for only that would stop his wire.

He had gained forty-eight hours.

He hoped that, for that length of time, he would not have to think.

Down by the sea a steamer's whistle hooted briefly, recalling him to his orders. For a moment he had

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a wild idea of dashing for New York, deserting, but he was too good a soldier to do that—and God knew what terrors he would perpetrate if he retraced his steps.

He pushed the money across with the message and raced along the street toward his ship, reaching the gangway just before its lines were thrown to the dock.

People were cheering wildly along the pier and waving to the vessel. Clay did not hear them. He stood at the rail looking south and west, toward New York, while the heavy engines throbbed and thrust them out into the Atlantic.

FOUR NIGHTS later, with midnight striking its eight bells in the saloon, a dark figure paused in its restive pacing along the promenade to mark with bitterness the passing of another day.

In his pocket were the copies of the three radiograms he had sent upon his failure to receive any word whatever from Laura. He took them out now, feeling them, and then, suddenly savage he hurled them into the sea.

Four days without anything to relieve the growing ache around his heart, days during which he stayed sober no matter how much he drank.

Twice he had assayed to play cards, but twice he had been able to sit still long enough to no more than start the deal, scarcely glancing at the first hand dealt. He had just left such a game.

Voices drifted through the darkened saloon window and shortly words began to penetrate Clay's consciousness.

"Ghastly business, getting hurt," said one that Clay recognized as belonging to an air-force lieutenant. "Hope I sh'll never have to hop it about on a cane."

"If your gunnery doesn't improve, I'll guarantee it," said another.

"Come, gentlemen, let's try it cut-throat."

"Never saw a chap so jumpy," persisted the lieutenant. "Got his wind up right."

"You mean," said a third voice patiently, "that Clay's yellowing about going back to war?"

"Well—"

"I have never expected shavetails to show much perspicacity," said the third, droning on. "The thing you're talking about isn't so. If you had ordinarily good sense, a thing also wholly unknown among shavetails, you would have noticed that he makes a trip every hour or two up to the radio shack."

"Re'lly?" said the lieutenant.

"Re'lly," mocked the third. "He can't contact his wife and he's worried sick."

"Oh, now," stuttered the shavetail, "I . . . uh . . . had no slightest idea—"

Clay shook himself and got away from the window. He roamed along the deck, looking out at the wind-swept sea. A sliver of moon was leaving a pattern of silver on the water, showing up the rushing mountains through which they plowed. The engines pulsed strongly but, at times, the *Empire* thrust her nose deep in and shuddered for an instant while she tried to get free.

Habit took him, at last, up the ladder to the bridge. Here a wind shrieked through the rigging and tore at the dodgers on the bridge, driving the watch officers behind glass. Clay braced himself against the roll and pitch and struggled up against the gale, his coat pushed tightly against him before and bellowing out behind. He turned into the passage behind the house and slipped into the radio room.

The operator, a pale youth, trying hard to grow a mustache and hide his age, looked up and saw who it was. He shook his head regretfully.

"Nothin' comin' in but calls for help, sir."

"No R.C.A. messages at all?"

"Oh, yes, I got one about two hours ago for Lieutenant Simmons."

"Then they could come through if there were any?"

"From New York? You bet they could, sir. I got your last message through right off. Relayed it by an American Export ship and they sent an O. K. and everything."

The receivers sizzled for a moment and the operator picked them up. "They're getting so they don't even send S O S's any more," he remarked sadly. "Just a blur of S's and their position. This's the *Merchant Queen.*" He jotted down the position. "We're too far away to do her any good. Weather's calmer down where she is, I guess. Damn this moonlight. A sub never asks for more. Are our destroyers still with us?"

"Were the last time I looked," said Clay.

"Get so not even destroyers can keep them off. We'd be a good bag for 'em, five food ships like us."

"We'll get through," said Clay.

The phones sizzled again and the youth scribbled on a pad. "U-boat shelling them, he says. Poor devil."

"Must have gotten away from the convoy," said Clay.

"Convoy can't wait for a ship with a breakdown, even if it can be fixed in an hour or two."

Clay gave the operator a package of cigarettes. "If you get anything, don't fail to wake me. I won't be asleep."

"Right-o, sir."

CLAY went back to the deck. For a few minutes he stood gazing at the silhouette of the ship next in

line, fuzzy against the uncertain moonlight.

If he could only *do* something! Just to pace around the confined spaces of a ship and wonder— What could have happened to her? Was she dead? Certainly if she were alive she would receive any message, for she would not move without leaving a forwarding address.

The wind reached him, finally, even in his abstracted state, and he went down to the saloon. For a little while he braved the thick smoke and babble of voices and even tried to engage in conversation with a munitions salesman. But he kept forgetting what he had started to say and could not remember what the other had said. He finished off his drink and gave his good nights.

Below he stretched out on his bunk, fully clad. He had not been able to sleep since leaving Halifax and he was certain that he could not sleep now. But such was his exhaustion that, before he had time to think about it, he drowsed off.

After an interval that seemed but the flash of an instant he felt the ship shudder and his ears were filled with instantly clamorous sound.

He sat up, trying to orient himself, automatically taking down his cap. Sound burst out again and once more the ship shuddered. Now there was a marked list.

Clay reached up in the darkness and opened his black-painted port. He was astonished at the daylight which smote him, for he did not think he had slept at all. Far off across a calming sea he saw a destroyer go tearing along, spewing black smoke and white depth bombs, plowing up the deep like a rat terrier digging out its game.

Somebody wrenched open his door —an airman. "All out, sir. Looks like we're sinking."

Clay put on his cap. The airman handed him a life preserver and, as they went up the ladder to the deck, helped him into it.

Men were pouring out of hatches and streaming up to the boat deck. The few soldiers and officers were standing aside, doing what they could to keep order. Under their feet the ship gave a sick lurch which placed the port lifeboats into the sea before their falls were loosened. There was a rush to starboard. Men were diving over the rail and vanishing. Water was in the well deck scuppers now and deepening. The ship gave another lurch.

Boat crews fought to keep the starboard boats away from the side with oars and hooks. An excited seaman released a fall too soon, spilling a score of men into the water. Two other boats got safely away.

Clay stood beside the mast. His airman had gone. Two members of the black gang struggled belatedly out of the ship, seared with steam, carrying a third between them.

The *Empire* was settling by the bow, now. Presently cold water would reach the boilers and blow her midship section apart. Clay had recovered from his first surge of guilt. This was happening in all parts of the Atlantic. Now, he smiled a little and steadied himself by holding a donkey handle.

The radio men, slipping into their jackets, burst out of their cabin and dived through a place where a boat had been, striking the near water like projectiles because of their life preservers.

This, Clay told himself, was the end. The boilers would go and the boiling shroud would suck him down —down—

A destroyer, leaving her attack on the submarine to her mate, came knifing back, spray geysering on

either bow, already getting out her boats.

The *Empire's* stern began to rise out of the water. Clay had to hold to both donkey lever and mast to keep from falling down a hatch forward of him.

He felt triumphant. With his whole heart he welcomed the oblivion which reached out to engulf him. Only one flaw marred it. He would never know how Laura met her death—

Suddenly he rebelled. Laura might not be dead. And if he could die, then the hold upon him might be finished.

But he would die. He made himself stand where he was. He could not run the risk of being again what he had been. Perhaps he had even brought this upon the poor *Empire.*

The stern was fifty feet above the water now. The bow was completely buried. Uneasily the *Empire* began to vanish, foot by foot into the sea. First her foredeck, then her wheel house, then half her superstructure—

If the boilers were ever going to go— A shattering explosion sounded and white steam shrieked to escape. Another blast and another— The whole deck before Clay burst outward. A montage of masts and rails and sky and sea and upset boats passed before Clay's eyes.

And then he knew nothing.

Nothing but the chill of water and then the coolness of oblivion.

HE OPENED his eyes resentfully upon the eyebeams above him. He closed them again and then, in disbelief, looked around him. He was lying in the scupper of a ship, on the half deck. He propped himself up on his elbow and found that he had unaccountably come aboard one of the freighters in the convoy. Several others were lying there with him on the steel plates but none of them were so fortunate.

Clay felt himself over and discovered he had not been injured.

"Hello," said a sailor, pausing in the bandaging of one of Clay's dripping neighbors. "How do you feel?"

Clay didn't answer. He got to his knees and looked at the sea where destroyers still chased around trying to pick up survivors.

"They got the blasted 'Un," said the sailor. " 'E come up and they jolly well ruined the blighter. 'Ot coffee waitin' in the galley, sor."

XVI.

BIG FLAKES of snow were falling on a mucky field somewhere north of Paris. Looking at the sky was like trying to see through a white-painted window. All day it had been threatening and now, with late afternoon, the snow had come.

Major Dunkirk paced up and down the tarmac, never taking his eyes from the sky to the north as though he could pierce the whiteness and find that for which he searched. His thick face was beet-color with the cold and from time to time he paused and beat his gloved hands together.

An orderly came from the radio hut and waited respectfully until Dunkirk noticed him. He handed over a yellow slip. The major read it avidly.

A captain came out of the hangar behind the major, attracted by the cessation of footsteps. "Any word?"

"Read that," said the major. "An observation plane reported the demolition of the dump two hours ago and we're just hearing about it. Damn it, Forsythe, he must have

gotten those bombers through. Why hasn't he come back?"

"If Clay can still fly, he'll come home. Must have been quite a show, what?"

"Show! Who cares about what kind of a show it was if it's done?"

"But, after all," said Forsythe, "a plane flying a hundred kilometers into Germany is bound to get a bit of a reception. If Clay got the bombers there, he got them home again—"

"What faith you have in the man!" said Dunkirk.

"I don't understand?" said Forsythe.

"I mean he's done the incredible before and all that, but he's got six of our ships out there somewhere and he's jolly well got to get them home. Frankly, old boy, I don't share your enthusiasm for McLean. True enough, they're hanging ribbons on him no end, but just the same he's lost three bombardiers in the past week and two gunners in two weeks. The men are getting so they refuse to fly with him despite the things he can do with a plane."

"When they ordered him to Hawker Henley light bombers," said Forsythe, "he kicked. Remember? Said his work was with pursuit. But with his airline training and all, the brass hats ticketed him with your bombing group. He's howled no end ever since. Just today you heard him begging the bombardier to answer sick call and forget about it. And he never wanted to be a senior flight leader, either. Be fair to him."

"Oh, of course, of course. I know all that. And I know how they're drooling about him. But when I think of the way his flights always get cut to ribbons— Why, damn it, man, he might have washed them out to a ship in this soup!"

Forsythe sighed.

"If they'd have let me stay a captain," growled the major, "I wouldn't have to sit and wait like this. It's ghastly. Men whose lives are depending upon my orders—"

"I thought I heard engines," said Forsythe.

"Engines! Where's that gun crew? But no . . . no we'd have the alarm if they were ours. Now, I hear them. I hear them, Forsythe!"

"Hawker Henleys," said Forsythe with decision.

A SHADOW flicked beyond the white haze of snow. The field shook under the growing roar of engines. In a moment the motors were still and wings moaned out of the blankness. The crunch and splash of landing wheels came from far out on the clear expanse. Other planes landed and blipping engines brought them waddling and churning up to the tarmac.

The major ran back and forth excitedly. "One . . . two . . . three, four—four! Four! Where the hell's the other two?"

Clay got stiffly down from his ship. His face was white and his fingers, as he saluted, wouldn't straighten from their long grip on the controls.

"Sir, we destroyed the dump as ordered and returned."

"Where are those other two planes?"

"Down out of control, sir. We ran into several squadrons of Messerschmitts. I'll make out my report. Forsythe," and there were lines of suffering around Clay's mouth, "would you have someone take Struthers down. He's . . . he's dead."

"Another?" cried the major.

"I couldn't help it, sir. We were trying to get our bombs away and for the moment we couldn't fight them off and when I turned around — Major, you've got to get me transferred to my old arm. I've got to get back to pursuits!"

"Two ships, your observer—" said the major.

"He destroyed the dump," Forsythe reminded him. "It would be odd if he got everyone back. According to orders it was worth six planes to get ammunition away from behind that fortress. Please leave him alone, sir."

Clay's batman, all admiration, was waiting to help Clay to his hut. Clay looked back at the four bullet-scarred Henleys and then, with a shiver, went toward his quarters.

Inside the batman gave over a drink. "Just sit yourself down, sir, while I get some dry clothes out. And drink that. It'll thaw out your guts, beggin' your pardon, sir."

Clay sipped the hot drink. His eyes were sunken from the strain of dodging along the battle lines and picking his way through a blinding flurry of snow which had taken them miles off their course, almost to Paris. The hammering of guns had been so incessant about him that his ears played him tricks and made the noise continue. Three Messerschmitts at least would never fly again. Several companies had been wiped out by the explosion of the dump. The crew of an antiaircraft battery were being buried with the remains of their gun—

He drained the rest of his drink at a gulp and poured another one from the warming pan. As he set the pan back his eyes rested upon a square of white which stood against a book on his table.

"What's this?"

"Came for you a while ago, sir,"

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DEPT. 165-R **CHICAGO**

said the batman, tugging at Clay's flying boots.

Clay held it up to the light and then ripped it open. It contained a single sheet, typewritten and without signature.

> CAPTAIN MCLEAN:
>
> This is a matter of life and death. When you are next in Paris call at 127, Rue Renault. Do not fail me. I have news in which you are vitally interested.

Clay frowned over it for some time, at first on the verge of laying it aside and then putting it into his log book. He had some leave coming after today's work. He had not taken any since his arrival. It was the barest of hunches but, somehow, he felt he must call at that address. Paris. Did he dare leave this field and his business of death? And as though echoing his uneasy thoughts the low rumble of guns, brought from the north by the changing wind, rattled the snow-smeared window of the hutment.

XVII.

IN PARIS the snow turned to slush almost as soon as it floated to earth. Trucks lumbered through the soggy streets, throwing out fans of muck to stain the sand-bagged walls of a church. People upon the walks, close to the old building to avoid the spray, glanced now and then with pathetic eyes at the camions and armored cars which were moving out with the darkness.

Laura left the church and stood upon the top of the steps, looking at the movement in the street without seeing it. The throb of an engine beat against the town from on high and she glanced up, instantly interested. During the past weeks she had become familiar with the planes to some extent and knew this to be French, probably an Amiot from the way it crept across the fading heavens.

She moved down into the crowd, again unseeing. As she walked darkness slowly settled over the city and soon she was groping her way with the rest, unhelped by so much as a gleam from the blanketed and black-painted windows. At such an hour the nerves of Paris began to tauten and men began to strain their ears to catch the first possible approach of a Nazi bombing fleet. Sand bags barred the way at corners where gunners sat in the dampness about their pieces, talking in low tones and smoking under cupped hands.

Close by the rooms she had rented was a café much frequented by air-force officers snatching a few hours respite from the constant strain of battle. Here she was in the habit of spending an hour or two in the evening, sitting unobtrusively at a table by the back wall, drinking a little wine and watching each soldier that came in.

As she entered, two officers bowed politely toward her. At first they had made advances and, when these had been quietly repulsed, had had to content themselves with nodding and then speculating as to who she was and why she was there.

Men rarely became drunk here in the noisy sense, for the old Frenchwoman who ran the place was strong of arm and much opposed to any violence not of her own manufacture. She came up now, to seat Laura at her usual table and talk to her within Laura's limited knowledge of French and the woman's limited knowledge of English.

"You look very cold," said the woman. "I shall mull you some wine I have. A very special vintage."

"Thank you," said Laura. "You have not—"

"No. The only Canadian officers who have been here are still here, at the table beside you." She went away.

LAURA LOOKED at the group near her. These men were all bombardiers and observers, all young and well started upon their evening. Without being noticed she sat on the other side of her table so as to hear a little better. She often did this, but seldom was she rewarded as she was this night. She had heard Clay's name mentioned many times before, usually in terms of praise.

"I tell you," said a lieutenant in a wobbly voice, "if I ever get assigned to his outfit I'll take it bing-o over the hill. I didn't come to this war to be bopped off by a hoodoo."

"You're balmy," said another. "Any man that can do what he's done, is certainly no hoodoo. Twenty-one planes in just about as many days and he's not even pursuit! I'd give a lot to have even a third of that record."

"He's a hoodoo," pouted the young lieutenant.

"Look," said a third with a pink complexion, "just because he's lost a few bombardiers is no reason to say that. Look at the assignments they give the poor blighter. Why if I was Captain McLean I'd—"

"You'd be a blasted hero," said the first. "And you'd go on winning the war all by your lonesome and losing more men than can be listed by the Ministry of Information."

"I tell you, he isn't that kind of chap," said the pink-cheeked lad. "I met him once. In Montreal. Prince of a fellow. Sort of melancholy like he knew his number was up, but a prince just the same. It works this way. Man shows some nerve and so the brass hats slip him all the hot work. He can't come out of it without losing something."

"Losing something!" sniffed the first. "I've kept a tally on him, I say. I've chalked them up. Every flight that goes out with him comes back shot up and half of them not at all. He's a hoodoo. He's lost eighteen planes around him since he's returned to the front."

"But it isn't his fault!" said the pink-cheeked one, getting excited. "They send him halfway to Berlin to blow up a train or a road, and, of course, half the kraut-eaters along the line jump on his outfit. He's headin' the aërial shock troops and as for me I'd take my chances on bein' his bombardier."

"Some men," said a fourth, "have an awful low opinion of their own lives. He lost an observer yesterday. An observer and two Henleys. He's nothin' but a glory hog and a Jonah to boot—"

"You'll take that back," said the pink-cheeked youth.

"To hell with you," said the fourth.

Chairs and the table and drinks went over with a shattering crash. The madame swooped out from behind her bar and soon had an officer in each hand, leading them to the door. She swept the light blankets away and pitched them out and then, turning, glowered at the room. But, no objection being offered to the act, she was soon her smiling self.

Laura sipped the warm wine, looking intently at the two remaining Canadians. But they did not open up the discussion anew. She had heard much, in roundabout ways, about Clay here in Paris, just as she had in London. It spoke much that her own connection with him was the only thing which had let her reach Paris at all. He had twice been decorated, according to the papers, since she had reached France.

The Frenchwoman brought her some soup and an omelette and almost ordered her to eat.

"You wait for him, yes. That is good. But when he comes you must not have starved yourself. You are so very beautiful and to stay so, you must eat."

LAURA ATE a little, her eyes more upon the door than upon her plate. Soon a strange feeling began to come over her and, obeying an impulse she could not explain, she put some francs upon the table and left.

Before the door of her house stood a mud-splattered motorcycle, its wing insignia almost hidden. She sped up the stairs toward her rooms and there, beyond the dim lamp in the hall, she saw him, knocking.

He turned toward the sound of her footsteps. He was too stunned by her presence there to say anything. She ran to him and clutched his shoulders. For seconds they stood, thus, not uttering a word. Something was pulling him away.

"I didn't know—" he breathed at last, twisting his cap and staring down at it. "I wouldn't have come if—"

"Just for a moment," she pleaded.

"No . . . no, I cannot."

"Clay," and she looked tearfully into his eyes. "Clay, don't you understand that it is more difficult for me to be away from you, lost to you, than to face a small thing like the chance of being killed?"

"You . . . you shouldn't have come."

"I had to come. I knew where you would go. I called Montreal the day after you left."

"But how could you come here? How was it possible—"

"Anything is possible to the wife of such a famous soldier. You're soaked through. Come in and let me get you some coffee. Some real coffee. I have been saving some—"

"You did not sign that letter. I didn't know—

"You would not have come had you known. Just a minute, Clay, please."

Gently she forced him in through the door. He stood there with melting snow dripping from his shoulders. Pretending that it made work to dampen the rug she took his coat from him and when she found his tunic was wet, that, too. She pulled a bell cord and stepped into the hall to hand them to the porter with orders to dry them.

Coming back she pushed him to a chair and finally overcame his reluctance to part with his muddy flying boots. These, too, she sent away with the porter, telling him to hurry and get them clean, but winking broadly at him not to.

She put a drink in Clay's hand and then hurried to the small kitchen from which came sounds of preparation from time to time.

Clay looked around him. It felt good to be in a warm room after that long, wet ride over bomb-pocked roads and through troops and supplies moving up. His eyes rested, here and there, upon small objects which spoke of Laura from other days in New York. Gradually the warmth of the drink and a treacherous feeling of well-being began to seep into him.

She came in with a tray and made him sit at the table. Indifferent food had been his lot for so long that the aroma of fresh and well-cooked steak and crisp toast and coffee made him realize how famished he was.

Little by little, he knew, his defenses were breaking down.

"You should never have come," he repeated over his coffee.

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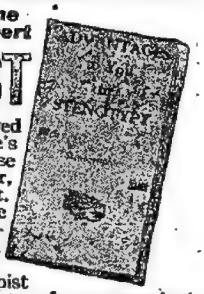

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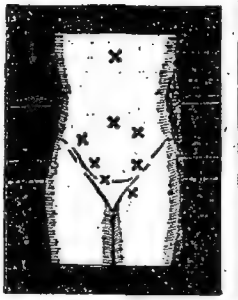

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"And yet you are sorry I came."

"I'm being a traitor to myself. I've no right—"

"Clay—"

"Yes?"

"Every person should have some small right in the manner of his or her death. Am I right?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Then I am choosing. I won't leave you again. I'll stay here or nearer to your drome and if you do not come to me whenever you can, I'll go to you."

"To me? But a bombing squadron—"

"You have my word for it. I am Mrs. Clay McLean and Clay McLean is a name that opens all doors. I don't care if I die. If you love me at all—"

He reached out and snatched up her hand. "Laura, you know—"

She brightened and came close to him. "Do you, Clay?"

"Yes! Forever."

She took his napkin and wiped a tiny dab of gravy from his mouth and then kissed him.

He felt himself losing and then knew that he was lost. All his effort, all his resolution— Lost in the vibrant darkness.

XVIII.

THE MUTTER of guns was closer tonight. Heavy artillery was pounding away at a section of line the infantry had not been able to break. The window of the hutment rattled until it seemed that it would be shattered. Pieces of mud came pattering down from the ceiling and the single electric bulb quivered. Even the bed shook with the waves

of concussion which rolled along the ground.

Twice tonight klaxons had made the airdrome leap to its defenses and snatch up its masks. Twice raiders had been driven off. Clay, writing at an ammunition-case desk, had not bothered to go to the bombproof. He had a little pile of wadded up paper about him and even then picked up what he had written and tore it across.

How could he keep her from killing herself? How could he fight down his own treacherous desire to go to her? Knowing as he did that it was only a matter of time before something happened to her.

A knock sounded and at his call, a hand swept back the curtain and Forsythe stepped in, carefully light-blocking the doorway behind him.

Clay motioned toward a place on the bed and Forsythe, looking around, sat down. Clay gave him a cigarette and waited for him to speak.

"Going to the cemetery in the morning?"

Clay winced. He hated to think that these bombardiers were dead, much less to know that he—

"Yes," he said dully. "I'll go."

"I'm assigning Simmons to you tomorrow."

"You—Simmons?"

"Yes, Clay. I'm in command."

"But how—"

"I didn't see you in the bombproof."

"No," shrugged Clay.

"And yet we lost six men a little while ago. It was pretty bad, Clay."

Clay turned a little white.

"Dunkirk was blown up. That's why I'm in command."

"Who else?"

"Your batman, Clay."

Clay's hands shook a little as he poured them out two drinks. "That's the fifth raid this week, isn't it, Forsythe."

"Yes."

"Forsythe. Why won't they put me back in pursuit?"

"Because you're too valuable in the light bombers. You bear a charmed life, old fellow. And if you can wipe out enemy positions, to the devil with mopping up enemy planes."

"Don't send Simmons with me tomorrow," said Clay.

"Why not? How the devil can one man—"

"I'll manage. I don't want anybody with me tomorrow, do you hear? I'll never fly with another man in my plane as long as I live. Nine men! Nine of them have been shot to pieces a few feet from me. Can't you understand? Nine men that didn't have any right to die. And now Dunkirk my commanding officer and poor old Morris my dog robber. Next it will be you or Thompson or . . . or my wife."

"Steady, old boy."

"I've held in too long now. I can feel myself cracking to pieces under it. You don't know, Forsythe. You don't know what I am!"

"A damned good pilot—"

"I'm what they call an accident prone. Everyone connected with me dies! We've lost two C.O.'s here. We've lost thirty-two men in raids. We're shy a dozen ships and pilots in a week! And now Dunkirk and Morris! Next it will be you or Laura!"

"I don't understand," said Forsythe. "An accident prone—I don't get it."

"Any insurance company will tell you what it is, I can't be killed. That's why I've collected these damned medals. That's why I'm filthy with glory. *I can't be killed!*"

Forsythe forced a drink into his hand. "War does strange things to a man, Clay. You've been thinking too much and drinking too little. Others have lost almost as much as we have, except that we get all the dirty work. Brace up."

"You still don't get it. If you did you'd never let yourself be near me again. We've been friends since we first started in this war together. And yet, the risk you run in knowing me is greater than any risk from bombs or bullets."

He was quiet after a little and his voice was controlled when he again spoke. "I've got a wife. I ran away from New York and came back here just to put her out of the way of danger. She's in Paris. I'm out of my head wondering what will happen to her—"

"Easy does it," said Forsythe, getting up. "Forget such tommyrot. Drink yourself into a good sleep. All brighter with the dawn."

Clay looked for a long time at the blanket under which Forsythe had left. He turned again to his writing paper but now he could not think of a word to say. Wearily he lay down and snapped off his light by pulling the string to it. Perhaps another raid would come and this time bombs would tear this hutment to bits and himself with it. But that, he told himself, was too much to hope.

It was still very dark when he came into semiconsciousness. He had a peculiar feeling that he had lost his earthly weight and floated now several inches above his bed. The sensation was not unpleasant, though slightly mystifying when he discovered that he was able to raise and lower himself at will. Suddenly he knew why it was that he was able to do this. He knew where he was going and why he had to go there. For how long had he hoped for just this chance!

Eagerly, then, he rose and found the night without wind or sound. He had the troublesome idea that he ought to be able to see the gun flashes in the north, but there was nothing.

For a little while he went onward without any sense of direction whatever and then it was as though he had picked up a pilot, for he turned upon his course and sped away toward a destination of which he was certain.

Before long he began to see a white glow in the distance. Gradually it materialized into walls, all angular and standing upon nothing. And then, coming closer, he saw the black square which was the gate.

He had been so certain that there had been someone with him that now, standing before the portals and finding they did not open he was surprised to discover how completely alone he was. He advanced, a little fearful that he would be unable to knock. But when he struck the coarse surface the racket gratified him.

Slowly the doors swung back. Two things in helmets stood there facing him without faces. He stepped forward into the reddish confines of the place. Nothing had changed. The constant, harsh sound was still to be heard; the floor was hard to walk upon and of ghastly red. He went forward down the corridor which increased in size and at last found himself in the great cavern. The yellow chair was empty and he cried out for an audience. His voice was very small and went bowling back and forth like a pebble.

"So you have come back," said a grating voice before him. The pres-

ence had come into the ugly yellow chair.

"I came back to see you, to plead with you to remove the anger you put about me."

The presence leaned forward and beckoned him nearer. "I put no anger about you."

"But when I ran away—"

"Oh, I know you now. Clayton McLean, I think. My memory is very good, is it not? For I have many, many like you." He thought it over for a moment. "But I do not recall ever having had one come unbidden before."

"I came for my release," said Clay. "I have glutted your belly with destruction and death. All about me men and women have died and I was powerless to stop it—"

"To stop it? When you yourself did it?"

"I despise this existence!"

"What? Despise it when it gives you immunity? When it wards off all harm and gives you more luck than you have ever before had in all your life?"

"I care nothing for the immunity or the luck. I shall take care of those things myself. Before you summoned me I was able to get along."

"Wounds and all, eh? How unappreciative you are. I went to the trouble of mending you, I even let a

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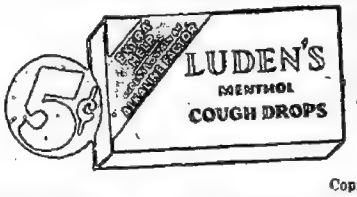

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certain physician live beyond his time to heal you, even though I ran a chance of having him heal others and make them happy."

"I must be released," said Clay doggedly.

"Surrounded by the instruments of destruction and you want to resign! There's the wisdom of man for you."

"I can take care of those. Everyone about me dies. I can no longer go on."

"Even with fame and luck?"

"Even with fame and luck."

"You are certain about this?"

"Yes."

"Clayton McLean, you have given me more than most of my servants. I dislike exposing you to what I will if I release you."

"I still wish it."

"Well," sighed the presence, "I cannot refuse after such faithful service. Very well, Clayton McLean, you are released. But I, who have such a poor opinion of man, am curious as to what motives prompt you."

"Forget the motives. I thank you for this release and trust that it is final."

"Indeed it is."

"Thank you."

"Wait. Don't go for a moment. I must know what brought you all this way. That's rare courage."

"After you took me for yours," said Clay sharply, "I fell in love with a woman who is now my life. If I go on as I have, sooner or later she will die."

"Ah. Laura Grant, now Laura McLean."

"You know of her?"

"Certainly," said the presence. "When she married you she became part of your immunity and luck. She, therefore, could not be destroyed. But go, I have released you."

"Wait! You mean she was not in

danger? And that perhaps something will happen to her now?"

"Yes."

"But you mustn't let it. I came here just for that."

"All right. I'll protect her. Now go."

Clay shouted for joy. He raced up the corridor and past the guards and out into the endless void.

Free!

He was free!

XIX.

IN THE CANTEEN, next morning, several flight officers were shaking dice, waiting for the order to take off. Clay stood at the bar. The flights were a little puzzled by Captain McLean this morning for they had been used to a sober, unsmiling fellow and now he was jubilant, laughing with everyone over nothing.

Forsythe watched him and felt better. "Feel good today, eh, Clay? Said dawn was always the brighter."

"Fine. Never felt better," said Clay. He finished his Scotch and stepped over to the gambling table in time to intercept the dice. The gamblers were puzzled for he had not offered to join them ever before. Pleased, they surrendered the box.

"Twenty francs," said Clay, putting them out.

They covered the bet and he threw. When the cubes stopped rolling they read a one and a two. "Crap!"

Clay seemed to be more pleased about it than a man who has just lost should be. But he threw another, larger note upon the board and tossed the dice again.

"Box cars!" cried Clay, jubilant all out of reason.

Having lost a second time he threw down a hundred-franc note, which was covered. Again he tossed the dice.

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"Eight," said the gamblers.

Clay threw a seven instantly and lost both money and dice. He laughed happily and backed away.

To Forsythe's questioning look he replied, "You wouldn't get it, but I can lose! I can lose, I tell you!"

A runner came, all splattered with mud, and handed Forsythe a message.

"You can win, too," said Forsythe. "Look at this."

Clay read it and then whooped for joy. "To Spitfires! I'm to be put back on Spitfires!"

Simmons breathed a sigh of relief to himself and drank his drink.

"Then I'll take off," said Clay. "I can have a ship, can't I?"

"Lauton should give you one. He's got three men in the hospital."

"Spitfires," said Clay, hurrying out toward the hangars.

A few minutes later he was getting into his flying suit, grinning at his astonished batman. Clay sat down before his desk and, letting his flying boots be put on him, scribbled a few lines.

LAURA DARLING:
It's all right. It's all finished. I can look the world in the eye once more. Tonight I'll get to Paris somehow. I love you. I love you. CLAY.

He addressed the envelope. "Make sure you mail this."

"Yessir," said the batman.

Clay loped out to where a Spitfire was warming on the line. Lauton yelled in his ear, "Patrol Sector 7 and keep out any photography planes. If you need support, howl for it."

"You bet," said Clay. He crawled into the pit and gunned the engine, glorying in its savage snarl.

Like a javelin of light, he streaked down the muddy field and up into the blue.

AN HOUR later, above Sector 7, Clay cruised at ten thousand feet, not shivering at all in the icy air. Below the roads, teeming with transport, snaked patternlessly but all leading to the front. There was a push in the offing, which was why no photographers should be let through.

Clay whistled a tune, which was lost in his slipstream and kept his eyes open.

Presently, in the north, he caught a flash of wings. He sat up and eyed the spot for some time. Shortly he did not need glasses to tell him that three flights of enemy aircraft were bent upon getting good plates of this activity.

He snapped on his radio. "Calling Field 29. McLean calling Field 29. Three flights of planes coming over Sector 7."

"McLean. You've got some Lysanders coming up, be with you in a few minutes. Can you mess it up until they get there like a good fellow?"

"Sure," said Clay.

He could identify the planes now. They were Junkers 87! They could fly him ragged while they strafed the roads below. Damn infantry for moving in daylight. "Calling Field 29. Calling Field 29—"

"Hello."

"These are Junkers 87 about to strafe the roads."

"Well, mess it up. The Lysanders are streaking for you this minute."

"O. K.," said Clay.

He cleared the throats of his eight guns and banked to climb above the advancing ships. Already one flight was diving down on the carpet. The top flight was waiting for Clay.

Clay looked around for the Ly-

sanders and failed to find them. He shrugged and climbed to meet the top flight. It was a foolhardy and gallant thing to do. He would not have been started on this patrol alone unless he had insisted. To spot these fellows should be enough. But he vaulted up the sky and centered his ringsight on the lead plane and let drive. He almost rammed it, for it burst into flames directly ahead of him. He went by in a flash and then, abruptly, his cowl was full of holes.

Wildly he verticaled to get out of the fire of the other two ships. But the second flight was coming up and suddenly they were ahead of him, raking him as he flashed across them.

He strove to get his sights on one and then his own plane quivered, stricken. The smell of gasoline was acrid in his nostrils. His engine quit and he went into a steep dive.

But the Junkers were built for diving. They were all about him, all firing at him in turn, methodically smashing him to bits.

Flames streaked back into his face and he fought to get out of his cockpit. His arm went numb and then his side. The wind was breaking his back. Somehow he managed to fall free.

Angrily he tried to reach his ripcord. But his right arm would not obey. He could not bend his left arm. Junkers, his burning ship, the roads below and the smoky sky all blurred and whirled in a mad cotillion.

He looked at his ripcord. It did not release.

And in those last few shrieking seconds of life, he understood.

He was free.

And Laura—Laura! The god had said he would protect her—and the god did not protect those who did not serve.

Savagely he strove to reach that

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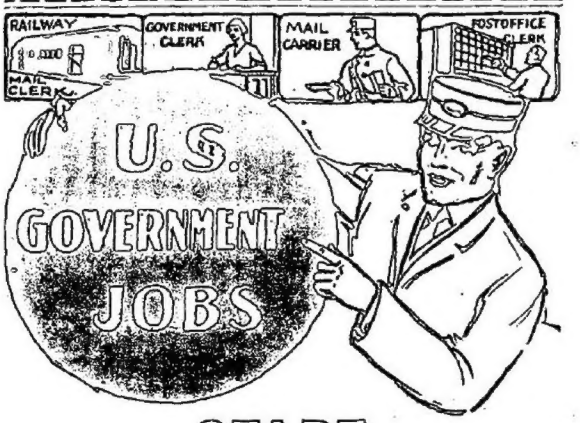

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ring. Laura! Oh, God, what had he done—

There was blackness.

XX.

LAURA GRIPPED the letter in a nerveless hand. She could not cry. Her eyes felt hot and dry. But an hour before she had received another letter.

"—I can look the world in the eye once more—get to Paris somehow—I love you—"

And now the words, all the more horrible because they tried to sympathize, which had almost stuck in Forsythe's shaking pen.

"In action— A brave and gallant officer— We shall miss him— All England will mourn with you—"

Somehow she got down the steps. She did not know where she was going but she felt that she must move about or suffocate.

She went slowly up the street. Suddenly sirens wailed about her and people rushed toward bombproofs. Antiaircraft began to wham throughout the city. Laura stood where she was, at the corner.

A shrill and rising scream ate down the sky. Masonry and thunder buffeted the walls on either side of the street. Other screams, terrifying to hear, racketed through the town. Close behind Laura a bomb lit squarely upon a bombproof, blowing it and its people into oblivion.

A hundred feet up the street a man dived for the entrance to a cellar and did not make it.

Laura stood where she was, hopefully watching dark dots grow bigger high above.

And then avenging flights swarmed across the sky and drove the evening raiders off and the city gradually stilled.

Laura, not yet understanding, stared at the death all about her.

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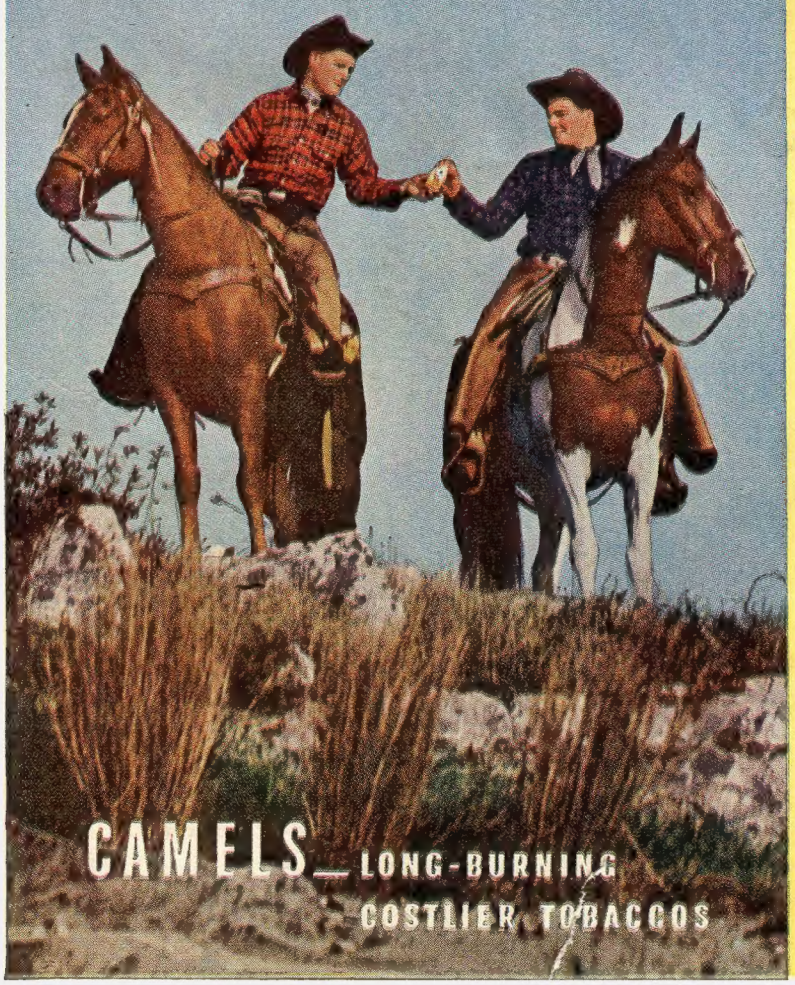

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